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**Asking For It: Girls' Sexual Subjectivity  
in Contemporary U.S. Cinema**

**by**

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**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2007**

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in Contemporary U.S. Cinema**

**Approved by  
Supervising Committee:**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate my work to girls and women who struggle to express their desires.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to family and friends who encouraged me to enter graduate school and supported me throughout this process. Thanks especially to Shanda and Bob Easterday, Courtney Blue, Liz Mazucci, and Liz Peters. For her generosity in sharing research materials, including her interviews with Sarah Jacobson and copies of Jacobson's films, without which my project would be lacking, I thank Andrea Richards. Many thanks also to Janet Staiger for proofreading drafts of my thesis and offering helpful advice. Finally, I am so pleased with this project only as a result of the insightful commentary, enlightening instruction, and dedicated involvement of Mary Celeste Kearney. For her shared knowledge and support, I am most grateful.

May 4, 2007

## **Abstract**

### **Asking For It: Girls' Sexual Subjectivity in Contemporary U.S. Cinema**

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How might American narrative cinema shift from oppressive objectification to positive, healthy female sexual subjectivities in films addressing and depicting adolescent girls? As more women make films both within the Hollywood system and independently, the potential increases for greater creative energy to be devoted to re-imagining and legitimizing girls' sexuality on film. Fighting Hollywood censors is a significant battle for women filmmakers, but making films independently is also a viable, even powerful, option. It is beneficial to fight both within patriarchal systems and outside them to effect change, and now, more than ever, women and girls have access to the technologies, skills, and understanding to alter public discourse about girls' sexuality and take control of their own representations. This project aims to point out just a few examples from commercial Hollywood, independent and DIY cinemas in which women have worked to position girl characters as active and desiring rather than as passive and desirable. Through ideological and narrative analyses of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Smooth Talk*, *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, and *Coming Soon*, coupled with discussions of their female directors' struggles with Hollywood patriarchy and American society's gendered double standard when it comes to youth sexualities, I hope to shed light on the need for women to make films that offer positive representations of girls' sexual subjectivities.

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## Introduction

**This movie really gets to me. It's as if these girls think that they have the right to have an orgasm.<sup>1</sup>**

My interest in how girls are represented in American films stems primarily from my own experiences in adolescence and an awareness of the social repercussions of the continued silence around girls' sexual subjectivity in American visual culture. While girls are consistently objectified and sexualized in popular film, television, and advertising, they are frequently denied the right to enter into public discussions of their bodies and their physical and emotional experiences. With regard to the objectification of female bodies in popular culture, Laura Mulvey has argued,

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, Mulvey's argument leaves little discursive space for female or otherwise oppositional spectatorship; however, it is clear that filmic representation has followed a certain trend in American culture which, historically, has adhered to prescribed gender roles of women as to-be-looked-at and men as those doing the looking. Knowing that teens have long made up a large portion of the market for popular cinema in the U.S., it is disturbing to note how few portrayals of adolescent girlhood—from girls' perspectives—have made it to the big screen. Fewer than those are films, made by women, that dare to broach the topic of girls' sexual desires or depict girls' perspectives

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous production designer on the set of *Coming Soon* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Mulvey, 33.

of their own sexual experiences. The constant fetishization and objectification of girls and women in cinema eclipses female subjectivities, leading to spectators' internalization of oppressive, sexist images. Why and in what ways are American spectators—specifically adolescent girls—left in the dark, or, rather, submerged in a sea of objectifying and oppressive imagery at the movies? And what makes it so difficult for women filmmakers to embark on film projects that subvert such objectification? My project here is to explore these questions via analyses of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Smooth Talk* (1985), *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997), and *Coming Soon* (2000)—four American films, made by women, which foreground girls' sexual subjectivity.

### **Girls' Sexuality**

Emily A. Impett, Deborah Schooler, and Deborah L. Tolman analyze the ways in which “internalizing conventional ideas about femininity...is associated with diminished sexual health among adolescent girls.”<sup>3</sup> Their 2006 study takes as its fundamental assumption Carol Gilligan's argument that relationships, rather than autonomy, are central to female adolescent development.<sup>4</sup> Impett, Schooler, and Tolman define adolescent sexual health to “include, among other things, the ability to acknowledge one's own sexual feelings, the freedom and comfort to explore wanted sexual behavior, and the requisite knowledge and ability to protect oneself from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy.”<sup>5</sup> They have found that girls and women in the United States suppress their sexual desires and needs in order to avoid conflict in important relationships, which in turn inhibits their ability to “enjoy sex, refuse unwanted

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<sup>3</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131-144.

<sup>4</sup> Gilligan 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131.

sex, and insist on the use of protection.”<sup>6</sup> Girls’ suppression of their desires is linked to the internalization of patriarchal social pressures to perform a femininity that should “be seen and not heard.”<sup>7</sup>

Gilligan has theorized this suppression of desires during a time when girls struggle with their sexual identities as a “loss of voice” in relation to girls’ subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Informed by this conceptualization of girls’ silence, Mary Pipher discusses adolescence as a traumatic time in which popular culture and society encourage girls to “disown themselves” by splitting into “two selves, one that is authentic and one that is culturally scripted.”<sup>9</sup> For her, “girls are inarticulate about the trauma at the time it happens.”<sup>10</sup> And they “lose their subjective fix on the universe, they are adrift and helpless, their self-esteem hostage to the whims of others.”<sup>11</sup> Girls are thus constructed as passive, silent victims of media objectification and society’s general neglect of their desires.

Michelle Fine and Lois Weis attribute adolescent girls’ hesitancy to speak out about social and cultural pressures to the relative silence regarding girls’ sexual desire in public education. Fine and Weis state, “The adolescent woman herself assumes a dual consciousness at once taken with the excitement of actual/anticipated sexuality and consumed with anxiety and worry.”<sup>12</sup> They adapt John Berger’s concept of women’s doubled consciousness—an awareness of simultaneously looking and being looked at—to their discussion of female adolescence. Berger theorizes women’s awareness of being looked at in patriarchal society and writes, “[a] woman must continually watch

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<sup>6</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 140.

<sup>7</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Gilligan 1982.

<sup>9</sup> Pipher, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Pipher, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Pipher, 150.

<sup>12</sup> Fine & Weis, 81.

herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.”<sup>13</sup> Much of Fine’s work is devoted to the ways in which girls are socialized to adhere to feminine ideals via this internalized awareness of being watched, while being denied subjectivity and appropriate sex education in public schools. While public education marginalizes girls and works to quiet them, popular media represent girls’ bodies as to be looked at, desired, maintained, and obsessed over—seldom detailing girls’ sexual desires, activities, words, and potential.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg positions this focus on the female body, in relation to consumer culture, as a health-risk for adolescent girls. “Although elevated body angst is a great boost to corporate profits, it saps the creativity of girls and threatens their mental and physical health.”<sup>14</sup> She refers to adolescent sexuality as perilous and argues that the role of society—specifically mothers—is to protect girls who “display sexual interest, *before* their minds are able to do the kind of reasoning necessary for the long-term, hypothetical planning that responsible sexuality requires.”<sup>15</sup> According to Brumberg then, girls in adolescence need to be nurtured and protected from the dangers of their sexual desires and changing bodies—in essence, from themselves and their sexuality. In this way, girls are made responsible, to a certain degree, for what is viewed as the inevitable victimization that results from the changes they experience during adolescence. The pervasiveness of this attitude toward girls’ sexuality is often echoed in popular visual culture, which makes the project at hand significant in its dedication to depictions of female sexual desires and exploration as pivotal to healthy self-discovery in adolescence.

The heightened scrutiny of girls in adolescence throughout the 1990s and beyond has generated what Anita Harris refers to as a “refiguring of the public/private split and

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<sup>13</sup> Berger, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Brumberg, xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Brumberg, 204.

the incitement to discourse”<sup>16</sup> which all but eliminates girls’ privacy and demands their entrance into the public sphere via new technologies and mediated representation.

The normalization of the insertion of the public gaze into the private regulates young women by demanding a constant display of self. Young women become ever-available and ever-monitored. Ironically, this situation is held up as desirable, as the celebrity life is the exemplar of the can-do experience.<sup>17</sup>

Girls may see that to be in the spotlight—to be the object of desire—is a way of controlling how they are represented, a form of agency. Celebrity is thus constructed as an ideal form of subjectivity for young women, while it ultimately relies on their continued objectification and exploitation.

While girls may have forms of power within contemporary culture, that power is highly regulated. Patriarchal ideology, which teaches girls and women to actively silence themselves and each other, continues to inform female subjectivity. As Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex*, internalization of patriarchal ideals of femininity results from unethical social systems that ensnare women and girls in cycles of self-evaluation and narcissism. “If she avoids the tyranny of an individual man, she accepts the tyranny of public opinion.”<sup>18</sup> The feminine ideals facing American women and girls originate in patriarchal ideologies responsible for the heteronormative male gaze, which objectifies women and girls, denies their subjective desires, and leads girls to dissociate from those desires, inhibiting girls’ sexual agency.<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir’s feminism requires that women and girls fight for sexual agency in order to be liberated from patriarchal oppression. In many ways, the films analyzed in this project serve the feminist cause of fighting for sexual liberation by representing girls’ explorations of sexuality as a

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<sup>16</sup> Harris 2004, 127. Credits “incitement to discourse” to Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, New York: Vintage, 1980a.

<sup>17</sup> Harris 2004, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir, 711.

<sup>19</sup> Tolman, 78.

beneficial part of the adolescent experience rather than positioning girls as endangered by sex and sexual desires.

### **Girls on Film**

“Until girls can say yes and not be punished or suffer negative consequences, until girls have access to alternatives to the romance narrative—which offers them one line only, ‘no’—girls will continue to have their ‘no’ mistaken for ‘token resistance’.”<sup>20</sup> While Tolman refers here to the experience of actual girls, the same can be said for girl characters in American films. Historically, motion pictures have shown a girl’s sexual desires and experiences to be dangerous to anyone in her path—but especially damning for the girl herself. According to the work of Georganne Scheiner, early 1920s’ U.S. film plotlines either idealized girls or cast them as delinquents, creating visions of actual adolescent girls as simply sweet and good, in films like *Lovey Mary* (1926) and *Little Annie Rooney* (1925), or as wild, criminal, and dangerously sexual, as in *Port of Missing Girls* (1928) and *Road to Ruin* (1928), as well as in flapper films like *The Wild Party* (1923) and *Campus Flirt* (1926). Movies were often blamed for the delinquency of girls and for potentially inciting female spectators to act on otherwise dormant sexual impulses.

Motion pictures may play a major or minor role in female delinquency and crime by arousing sexual passion, by instilling the desire to live a gay, wild, fast life...by the depiction of various crimes readily imitated by girls and young women.<sup>21</sup>

Girl characters that demonstrated excessive sexual desire were necessarily punished for it, and “such depictions reinforced popular perceptions of delinquency on one hand, while eroticizing female adolescent sexuality on the other.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tolman, 204.

<sup>21</sup> Blumer & Hauser, 199.

<sup>22</sup> Scheiner, 23.

By the late 1930s, very young girls like Shirley Temple and teen stars like Deanna Durbin and Judy Garland had emerged with such distinct personas that Hollywood studios reaped the rewards of vehicles created for their talents. This shift, along with the establishment of the Production Code Administration in 1934 and a need for fantasy and escape during the Depression led to the idealization of adolescent girls “as competent, almost magical beings that could solve the problems of all around them.”<sup>23</sup> The 1920s’ pre-code films of adolescence were more erotically charged compared to later films, which “increasingly portrayed girls as asexual in the 1930s.”<sup>24</sup> Examples include *Three Smart Girls* (1936), *Everybody Sing* (1938), and *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938). While implementation of Hollywood production codes made explicit sex taboo in films of the mid-1930s, teens in the real world of high school held more open attitudes toward sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

According to Scheiner, teen films of the 1940s worked to dispel fears of female sexuality which had been laid low throughout the Depression but would reemerge in the prosperity of World War II and the postwar period. Adolescent girls at the time were a force to be reckoned with not only in the public consciousness but also economically, as many took jobs and had more money to spend on clothes, make-up, and movies, among other diversions. “The most identifiable icon of this new teen market was an adolescent girl, a bobby-soxer.”<sup>26</sup> Teen subculture, with its own trends of fashion, behavior, speech, and interests, became more recognizable in the public sphere as a result of increased consumer power and visibility. World War II-era films, like the 1944 productions *Since You Went Away*, *Song of the Open Road*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, represented girls as

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<sup>23</sup> Scheiner, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Scheiner, 62.

<sup>25</sup> Scheiner, 62.

<sup>26</sup> Scheiner, 93.

“symbols of domesticity and bulwarks of the home front,” while films like *Janie* (1944), *Youth Runs Wild* (1944), *Miss Annie Rooney* (1945), and *Kiss and Tell* (1945) portrayed girls “as delinquents and bobby-soxers who, while subverting traditional notions of domesticity, always did so with the ultimate goal of marriage.”<sup>27</sup> Stereotyping girls in these ways trivialized the real issues faced by teens in the 1940s, but attempts to disguise, with comedy, social anxiety over girls’ sexuality only laid bare the tension.

The following decade brought competition from television and changing attitudes toward sex, as well as loosening of Hollywood production codes. A teen population boom had also begun and with it came an explosion in the production of teen films, both in Hollywood and by independent companies. According to Thomas Doherty, “In 1955, the profit margins and the controversy generated by MGM’s *Blackboard Jungle* and Warner Bros.’ *Rebel Without a Cause* cued...savvy moviemakers to the theatrical attraction rebellious youth held for teenage moviegoers.”<sup>28</sup> The result was a rash of teen exploitation films that often featured sexualized girls.<sup>29</sup> According to David Considine, “[t]he sexual fears of the forties came to fruition in the fifties and early sixties.... On the screen, sex was a major battleground between the generations.”<sup>30</sup> He discusses the growing phenomenon of youth-parent conflict about sex in films like *The Unguarded Moment* (1956), *A Summer Place* (1959), *Blue Denim* (1959), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), noting that “families provided the forum within which the debate over sex and morality was waged.”<sup>31</sup> He envisions films of the late 1950s and early 1960s as having significantly changed depictions of adolescent sexuality via Hollywood’s shift “from the

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<sup>27</sup> Scheiner, 98.

<sup>28</sup> Doherty, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Examples include *Hot Car Girl* (1958), *Dragstrip Girl* (1957), *Unwed Mother* (1958), and *Diary of a High School Bride* (1959).

<sup>30</sup> Considine, 217-218.

<sup>31</sup> Considine, 218.



question of sex to gender, from the issue of simply having sex to the question of what it meant to be sexual.”<sup>32</sup> In her discussion of Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1962), Kristen Hatch argues that “film audiences in 1962 perceived Humbert Humbert’s interest in his stepdaughter to be a normal, if atypical response to a sexually precocious girl.”<sup>33</sup> In the social climate of the early sixties—prior to heightened awareness of child sexual abuse via the feminist movement of the 1970s—the adolescent *Lolita* is responsible not only for her sexual desires but for those of her stepfather as well. Over the course of the next decade, the sexual revolution would impact social constructions of sexuality and youth, leading to more sophisticated depictions of sexual relationships including “a franker and more honest interpretation of adolescent sexuality throughout the sixties.”<sup>34</sup>

Continued violation of the production codes by major Hollywood studios led to the demise of the Production Code Administration and the creation of a ratings system in the late 1960s. With changes in the codes, films began more closely to resemble lived experiences of teen sexuality, according to Considine. He writes, “Adolescent females were becoming more liberated and libidinal.... By the seventies, adolescent women were in hot pursuit of the men they desired.”<sup>35</sup> While girls and women may have felt more sexually liberated in the seventies than they had in previous decades, popular films did not necessarily represent them as such after the late sixties. In her book, *Where the Girls Are*, Susan Douglas shares her experience of girls and women in films revealing, “in the early to mid-1970s, women were invisible in the movies. The medium that had responded most rapidly to changing sexual mores in the late 1950s and early 1960s was one of the slowest to respond to the changing status of women in the early 1970s.”<sup>36</sup> According to

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<sup>32</sup> Considine, 234.

<sup>33</sup> Hatch, 164.

<sup>34</sup> Considine, 246.

<sup>35</sup> Considine, 276.

<sup>36</sup> Douglas, 202.

her study, the women's liberation movement of the early 1970s derailed marketing strategies, causing contradictory reactions from media outlets afraid of losing their female audiences. In the case of the commercial film industry, fear and uncertainty over how to reach women meant simply working around them—or without them. Girls suffered a similar fate in Hollywood production, rarely being the focus of popular film narratives during the 1970s.

But adolescence was a preoccupation in films of the following decade, as it had been for films prior to the 1970s.

Given the categorical choices offered by the multiplex theater, teens in the '80s were then able to go to the mall and select the particular youth movie experience that most appealed to them, and Hollywood tried to keep up with changing teen interests and styles to ensure ongoing profits.<sup>37</sup>

Malls and multiplexes were, in part, symptomatic of an increasing teen population. The increases of the teenage population reported as significant in 1975 and again in 1992, coupled with greater buying power, signaled to producers and brand marketers across industries that this was a growing and profitable consumer base. After an upsurge in production of teen films about loss of virginity, often from a lighthearted comedic perspective—what he calls “sex-quest” films, Timothy Shary notes a dramatic shift in film production in the mid-eighties, attributed to society's newfound fears surrounding AIDS. The sex-quest comedies of the late seventies and early eighties came about in response to the sexual revolution and subsequent loosening of censorship during the 1970s, but the genre was somewhat short-lived as HIV/AIDS reached epidemic proportions.

While AIDS was recognized in 1981, its capacity to be spread by heterosexual contact was not clear until the mid-'80s, and not coincidentally, there was a dramatic decline in the number of youth films featuring the loss of virginity after

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<sup>37</sup> Shary 2002a, 6.

1986. In fact, with the exception of the parodic *Virgin High* in 1990, the youth sex-quest film stopped production altogether from 1986 to the mid-‘90s....<sup>38</sup>

While Shary’s study of teen-centered films is primarily based on analysis of genre conventions, he allows for discussion of subversive images of girls that challenge the tropes and stereotypes of teen subgenres, particularly in the 1990s. Unfortunately, he refrains from pursuing analysis of films like *Coming Soon*, which trouble the conventional sexual objectification of girls. Shary’s work illuminates the conventions of commercial and independently made youth films, but is not meant to be a thorough exploration of the emergence of films depicting girls as positive and powerful sexual agents or of the impact that women working in film may have on girls’ representation.

In an attempt to bring into focus the ways in which certain films, made both within and apart from the constraints of Hollywood, work to challenge dominant portrayals of girls’ sexuality on screen, I study films made by women influenced by second-wave and punk feminist politics and their own experiences of American female adolescence. My analyses are informed not only by Scheiner, Considine, and Shary, but by Sarah Hentges’ writing on girls’ coming-of-age in independent and commercial cinema, Christie Milliken’s discussion of the DIY experimental and documentary work of Sadie Benning, and Mary Celeste Kearney’s work on the impacts of Riot Grrrl and “girl power” feminisms on female adolescent subjectivity in films during the 1990s.

### **Feminist Filmmaking**

Until the late sixties and early seventies, women had been relatively absent from filmmaking, those who did work in the industry were primarily writers and actors. As more women began to enroll in film schools during the 1970s, second-wave feminism, cultural production, and critical thought merged to institutionalize and popularize women

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<sup>38</sup> Shary 2002a, 227.

filmmakers and feminist film criticism. In her discussion of feminist filmmakers of the seventies, Annette Kuhn explains, “[T]he earliest independent filmmakers of second-wave feminism took up the technology of 16 mm” due to women’s “great difficulty in obtaining training and positions in certain areas of production within the film industry” which relied at that time on 35 mm film.<sup>39</sup> She makes the point that many independent filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s first took a documentary approach for a variety of technological and economic reasons. “16 mm film technology was developed hand in hand with a particular type of documentary cinema—direct cinema.... As a consequence of this, early feminist filmmaking was largely documentary in form.”<sup>40</sup> Julia Lesage, who connects 1970s’ feminist politics with documentary filmmaking, discusses the radical implications of filming real women’s lives as opposed to mimicking the images of women created and recreated by dominant, commercial film practices.<sup>41</sup> She elaborates on the introduction of feminist documentary and avant-garde films into film courses, film festivals, and critical publications in the early 1970s.

There are a few women making experimental films, pushing the medium itself as far as they can. Perhaps this is because the technical/chemical/mechanical side of film has been traditionally of more interest or more accessible to men, women being socialized to enter cinema through its aspect as art.<sup>42</sup>

But by the late ’70s, feminist filmmakers had begun to consider ways in which they could access and appeal to wider audiences. Within the larger social and political context of the 1970s, their films were able to find funding, distribution, and exhibition through government and alternative resources, such as women’s centers and private foundations; however, by the mid-eighties the context had changed drastically.

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<sup>39</sup> Kuhn, 177.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, 177.

<sup>41</sup> Lesage 1978, 507-523.

<sup>42</sup> Lesage 1979, 152.

The two major U.S. distributors of women's films had ceased to exist by 1985, and "the large network of women's centers [had] greatly diminished."<sup>43</sup> In order to continue reaching audiences, feminist filmmakers had to find new ways of distributing and exhibiting their films. Few independent filmmakers had the personal resources to complete projects without the help of investors, and it was difficult to secure investors for a film that could not promise success at the box office. Perhaps this was the moment at which the realization that "any kind of film production is a compromise" would allow women to consider how their priorities had changed and attempt to determine how that should affect their filmmaking.<sup>44</sup> Due to limited options for distribution and exhibition of films made by women, the dominant film world—and a turn toward commercial narrative filmmaking—became more and more appealing.

B. Ruby Rich describes the changes that resulted in the decisive shift to narrative production on the part of women filmmakers by the mid-1980s:

In part, this turn to fiction has been necessitated by changes in economics and funding patterns.... In equal part, however, it was probably a response to the very real pressures brought to bear on filmmakers who took on the burden of uplifting the gender: fiction allows more leeway, sits more easily with the auteurist style demanded by the age, and offers more freedom from collective expectations.<sup>45</sup>

As Michelle Citron wrote in 1988, "[Narrative film] allows for contradictions, paradoxes, and uncertainties.... Ultimately, my argument is for heterogeneity; to add to the production of [feminist] documentary and avant-garde, not to replace it."<sup>46</sup> She speaks from personal experience as she explores narrative film production in her own work. Similarly optimistic about the possibility of commercial narrative filmmaking, Amy Heckerling (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, 1982) and Joyce Chopra (*Smooth Talk*,

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<sup>43</sup> Citron, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Citron, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Rich, 82.

<sup>46</sup> Citron, 62.

1985), among other women filmmakers, directed narrative films geared at commercial, though not necessarily mainstream, Hollywood audiences of the 1980s.

### **Contemporary Feminist Politics**

Having splintered on issues of race and sexuality, the feminist movement became increasingly fragmented throughout the 1980s by debates over antipornography legislation and its impact on freedoms of artistic and sexual expression. Out of those debates arose the pro-sex feminism of the 1990s, which would attempt to erode traditional sex roles in efforts to claim women's right to sexual desire and sexual pleasure. Alongside considerable backlash, feminist ideologies became increasingly popularized, manifest in new and different ways often with a focus on younger generations of women and girls. Like second-wave feminism in the 1970s, Riot Grrrl feminism of the early 1990s had oppositional politics at its core—its name being “a feminist reclamation of the word *girl* with a less polite and more assertive political stance.”<sup>47</sup> It began with feminist punk bands such as Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, formed in reaction to male-dominated punk counterculture in which girls were generally restricted to participating as girlfriends of boys already involved. Riot Grrrl culture has had many incarnations but is most often recognized for its feminist punk music and printed zines. Not only do varied DIY (do-it-yourself) aesthetics and conventions of form and content distinguish Riot Grrrl media from commercial media, but a general lack of interest in revenue potential and inability to reach vast audiences directly oppose mainstream media goals for saturating markets and reaping as much profit as possible.

Heavily influenced by Riot Grrrl feminism, DIY filmmaker Sarah Jacobson (*Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, 1997) brings girls' sexuality and the double standards of Hollywood representations into stark perspective—for those few who have

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<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg & Garofalo, 809.

the privilege of screening her films.<sup>48</sup> Jacobson simultaneously challenged representations of girls in commercial film as well as the very practices of Hollywood film production and distribution, by working entirely independently of the Hollywood system. While Jacobson distinguished herself and her work from Hollywood filmmakers and commercial films, her politics—the Riot Grrrl devotion to feminist rebellion against patriarchy—were easily co-opted by corporate powers marketing products to girls in the name of empowerment.

The “girl power” feminism of the early 1990s is an example of the cooptation of feminist ideas in attempts to indoctrinate girls and women into contemporary consumer culture that—no less fervently than ever—emphasizes uniform and unrealistic conventions of beauty and an obsession with youth. Perhaps the most commonly referenced site of such cooptation is the Spice Girls phenomenon. The Spice Girls were a British all-girl pop group made up of five young women, characterized by distinct—though stereotypical—styles of dress, behavior, and personality. They appealed primarily to pre-teen girls with messages of empowerment through identities based in consumer culture. The band toured, performed, and produced albums, videos and a feature film, crossing continents and markets with a wide variety of merchandise (figurines, dolls and toys, clothing and accessories, games, and videos). Ultimately, the Spice Girls offered a superficial form of “girl power” feminism that corporate marketers adopted to appeal to young girls to purchase other products. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that “while part of an emphasis on the empowerment of youth signals a larger cultural shift in definitions of childhood itself, it is also reflective of shifting feminist politics, where access to female empowerment is increasingly found within commercial culture,

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<sup>48</sup> Jacobson’s film relies on a frank depiction of sexual initiation and the subsequent search for sexual fulfillment from a teen female perspective—something commercial Hollywood consistently avoids and censors.

rather than outside the hegemonic mainstream.”<sup>49</sup> Such “empowerment” frequently amounts to product advertisements and media personalities promising girls and women that their ability to shop and determine brand loyalties enables them to control trends, take an active role in society, and set themselves apart from the crowd. But as Banet-Weiser points out, media representations of “girl power” feminism may also “address a politico-social power represented in terms of feminist subjectivity.”<sup>50</sup> Several girls’ films of the mid- to late 1990s, such as *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998), *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), *Manny & Lo* (1996), attempt to subvert this consumerist view of femininity in search of more accurate and beneficial—feminist—portrayals of girlhood.

While Rich claimed in 1998 that “‘feminist film’ as a term and a practice has increasingly lost its meaning over the decades,”<sup>51</sup> feminist filmmakers continue to work within and outside of Hollywood, finding greater support for their work than in decades before the strengthening of the independent film industry in the 1980s.

In spite of the relatively low ratio of females to males in the film industry today, the increase in the number of women producers, directors, writers, and studio executives over the last three decades has allowed female, and, at times, feminist perspectives to gain more legitimacy and screen time.<sup>52</sup>

In efforts to gain ground for representations of powerful, sex-positive girls in popular cinema, independent filmmaker Colette Burson created a depiction of teen girls who have all the accoutrements of “girl power” material culture yet still struggle with issues of sexual identity and girls’ rights to sexual pleasure in her film *Coming Soon* (2000).

While changing times continue to allow for the redefinition of feminism, and women filmmakers attempt to avoid being categorized based on the content of their work,

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<sup>49</sup> Banet-Weiser, 124.

<sup>50</sup> Banet-Weiser, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Rich, 379.

<sup>52</sup> Kearney 2002, 130.



feminist representations of girls can still be found in Hollywood productions and, more so, in independent films. The films analyzed in the following chapters are representative not only of the struggles of American girls dealing with society's silence regarding their sexual identities, but also of women's struggles to portray girls' experiences in commercial and independent and counterculture cinemas.

Nearly twenty years ago, filmmaker and theorist Michelle Citron asked, "What does it mean for women to decide to enter into the production of mainstream popular culture?"<sup>53</sup> For Citron and other feminist filmmakers, it meant accepting that what is personal is also political. She advocated expanding feminist politics beyond overtly political documentary and highly theoretical avant-garde cinema into traditional narrative genres of filmmaking. Women filmmakers found audiences in the 1980s by "exploiting different distribution strategies...or more easily by making films that fit into current distribution and exhibition markets, usually meaning mainstream narrative."<sup>54</sup> My project here is to revisit Citron's question—or a version of it—in efforts to advance discussion on the representation of girls' sexual subjectivity in films made by women. Approached from this angle, the question becomes: What does it mean for women to enter into the production of mainstream, commercial films for and about girls in adolescence, and how does that differ from the experiences of women in the independent realm? Which leads me to ask: How might women's involvement in film production—both independent and commercial—positively impact representations of adolescent female sexuality, and what can be done to improve the diversity of images of teen girls in popular film?

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<sup>53</sup> Citron, 45.

<sup>54</sup> Citron, 55.

## My Project

While Hollywood's profit-based motivations remain the same, mainstream representations of female adolescence and female sexuality change according to the socio-historical moment in which they exist. Chapter one provides a discussion of the socio-historical context from which *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Smooth Talk* (1985) emerged, as well as offering insights into the politics and aims of their directors. Similarly, chapter three is devoted to contextualizing *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1996), and *Coming Soon* (2000) and theorizing the relationships between the struggles of their directors and the representation(s) of girls' sexual subjectivity in their films. These discussions rely on interviews with women directors along with critical reviews and analyses of their films and careers. Chapters one and three, respectively, position films of the 1980s and 1990s in relation to film industry censorship and the prevailing views of girls' sexuality that come to bear on their content, production, distribution, and critical and commercial successes or failures.

While chapters one and three work to contextualize thoroughly the films mentioned above, chapters two and four focus on analyzing the films' formal elements of editing and cinematography, narrative arc and character development with regard to their depictions of girls' sexual subjectivity. As the conditions of a film's production and distribution might require, I will explore the role of the Motion Picture Association of America in policing these representations of female adolescent sexuality. Though the majority of 1980s' teen films privilege male sexuality and perpetuate the objectification of women and girls, a few incorporated female experiences with sex and sexuality from girls' perspectives. In particular, Amy Heckerling and Joyce Chopra each created a film during the early eighties that attempted to challenge the gendered double standards of Hollywood film production by representing girls' sexual subjectivity. The films analyzed

in chapter two, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Smooth Talk*, were chosen for their relative popularity in the 1980s when few women filmmakers were working in the industry and representing girls' sexuality on film. With reference to Robin Wood's analysis of *Fast Times* and Rich's criticisms of *Smooth Talk*, chapter two centers on depictions of sexual initiation and girls' sexual desire. The films analyzed in chapter four present girls actively seeking out sexual pleasures without being punished for expressing and fulfilling their desires. *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* and *Coming Soon* stand apart from those discussed in chapter two in that they foreground girls' experiences without punishing them for their interest in sex. None of the girls deals with unwanted pregnancy or is led into a life-threatening trap by a sexual predator, as ultimately occurs in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Smooth Talk*, respectively. The films I chose for the fourth chapter were not commercial successes at a time when a considerable number of films were being made about girlhood and adolescence. These films address girls directly and frankly about their desires, but were not exhibited in the mall multiplexes across the nation. I want to explore why not and what this means for future representations of girls in popular film.

How might American narrative cinema shift from oppressive objectification to positive, healthy female sexual subjectivities in films addressing and depicting adolescent girls? As more women make films both within the Hollywood system and independently, the potential increases for greater creative energy to be devoted to re-imagining and legitimizing girls' sexuality on film. Fighting Hollywood censors is a significant battle for women filmmakers, but making films independently is also a viable, even powerful, option. It is beneficial to fight both within patriarchal systems and outside them to effect change, and now, more than ever, women and girls have access to the technologies, skills, and understanding to alter public discourse about girls' sexuality and take control

of their own representations. This project aims to point out just a few examples from commercial Hollywood, independent and DIY cinemas in which women have worked to position girl characters as active and desiring rather than as passive and desirable. Through ideological and narrative analyses of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Smooth Talk*, *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, and *Coming Soon*, coupled with discussions of their female directors' struggles with Hollywood patriarchy and American society's gendered double standard when it comes to youth sexualities, I hope to shed light on the need for women to make films that offer positive representations of girls' sexual subjectivities.

## Chapter 1

### **Teen Dreams: Contextualizing *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) & *Smooth Talk* (1985)**

While the Hollywood film industry has been slow on the up-take when it comes to offering healthy portrayals of girls' sexual subjectivity,<sup>1</sup> even as early as 1982 there appeared in popular films more frank depictions of girls' sexual experiences shown from girls' perspectives. Historically, girls in popular U.S. films have most often been portrayed as delinquent and dangerously sexual,<sup>2</sup> innocently asexual,<sup>3</sup> or flirtatious and eager to please (men),<sup>4</sup> but the increase in production of teen films in the 1980s created openings for more diverse and complex representations of girls and sexuality. And as teens and youth culture(s) became more visible, the power of the teen consumer market grew, inciting greater marketing efforts and more media directed at teens and pre-teens. The growth in teen population that occurred in the 1950s had similar effects on the focus of cultural production and marketing on youth. But thirty years later Hollywood production codes were gone, society's ideas about sexuality had changed considerably, and censors had significantly loosened their grips on film content.

As the commercial film industry changed, the independent film community grew stronger and more productive. The independent production companies of the early

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<sup>1</sup> Tolman, Striepe, and Harmon (2003) define adolescent sexual health to include: "the ability to acknowledge one's own sexual feelings, the freedom and comfort to explore wanted sexual behavior and refuse unwanted behavior, and the requisite knowledge and ability to protect oneself from sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy." Quoted in Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131.

<sup>2</sup> See Scheiner's discussion of *Road to Ruin* (1928), *Youth Runs Wild* (1944), *Wild in the Streets* (1968) on pages 39-42, 100-102, and 140 respectively. See also Doherty's analysis of 1950s films.

<sup>3</sup> See Scheiner's discussion of *Little Annie Rooney* (1925), *Three Smart Girls* (1936) on pages 28-29 and 71-72 respectively.

<sup>4</sup> See Scheiner's discussion of *Bikini Beach* (1964) and *Beach Blanket Bingo* (1964) on page 139.

eighties helped create alternate avenues for women to make films and allow for greater representation of female perspectives. Women who had attended film schools in increasing numbers in the late 1970s found independent funding for their projects in the 1980s, many of which “directly address[ed] subjects which are either denied or underrepresented in a mainstream cinema largely controlled by white males.”<sup>5</sup> Some women directors worked to break down the long-held double standard in American society that girls and women be represented as desirable bodies, endangered by sexuality, while boys and men on screen are consistently active in sexual pursuits, most frequently desiring those female bodies made available to them. Films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), directed by Amy Heckerling, and *Smooth Talk* (1985), directed by Joyce Chopra, would eventually lead to more and more films foregrounding the sexual desires and experiences of female adolescents, as well as to increased recognition of the possibilities for women in commercial and independent filmmaking. This chapter aims to explore the factors that most impacted representations of girls’ sexuality in American film, in the early to mid-1980s, through discussions of changing constructions of sexuality, feminist movements, and the specific difficulties faced by Heckerling and Chopra as they made their films.

### **Girls in Hollywood Cinema 1940s – 1980s**

U.S. courts ruled in 1948 that motion picture studios could no longer control theatres as they had in the past. Theatre owners began to determine what would play, segmenting audiences, and forcing the film industry to rely more heavily on its successes in the teen market. After World War II, the growing teen market became more recognizable to Hollywood and theatre owners as a most lucrative audience, ripe for exploitation—hence the slew of exploitation films of the time that were preoccupied with

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<sup>5</sup> Allen, 148.

teen sexuality, delinquency, and crime. “Films about adolescent girls in the 1950s increasingly began to reflect a very liberal attitude about sex, attitudes that are in many ways more liberal than their early 1960s counterparts.... Exploitation and sensationalism were used to attract a teen audience.”<sup>6</sup> Several films of the 1950s, including *Peyton Place* (1957), *A Summer Place* (1959), and *Blue Denim* (1959), pointed to “the double standard and adult hypocrisy, and suggested that teenage sex was often inevitable.”<sup>7</sup> The teenpic double bills of the late 1950s incorporated two different exploitation films to simultaneously appeal to multiple teen markets. According to Doherty, “In popular double features like Allied Artists’ *Unwed Mother* (1958)/*Joy Ride* (1958) and AIP’s *Sorority Girl* (1957)/*Motorcycle Gang* (1957)...the first film was ‘aimed at the femme teenage market’ and the second conceived ‘as a sop to the male side.’”<sup>8</sup> While such exploitation films reveled in sexualizing women and girls, Hollywood continued to lean toward what Doherty refers to as “clean teenpics” on the rationale that “the industry’s future lay in purveying good, clean entertainment to the worldwide family of man.”<sup>9</sup> Films of the early 1960s offered mixed messages about sexuality. Many continued to offer predictable, lighthearted views of girlhood—most often appealing to pre-teen audiences—as in *Take Her She’s Mine* (1963), *The Impossible Years* (1968), and a stream of beach romps like *Beach Party* (1963) and *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* (1965). Simultaneously, cinema geared toward attracting young adult audiences generated pregnancy melodramas, such as *Susan Slade* (1961) and *Love with the Proper Stranger* (1963), warning of the consequences girls would endure if they had sex, while films like

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<sup>6</sup> Scheiner, 138.

<sup>7</sup> Scheiner, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Doherty, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Doherty, 179.

*Splendor in the Grass* (1961) made the adult repression of teen sexuality appear hazardous.

By the late 1960s, films marketed to teens had worn out the delinquency drama, bobby-soxer comic relief, and the loose sexuality of beach romps. The teens of the 1950s were growing into young adults during the 1960s and the sexual revolution forced sexual taboos, like homosexuality, promiscuity, nudity, and female sexual desire, into public view. Television had swiftly become popular, threatening to compete for film audiences and contributing to the loosening of Hollywood censorship. French New Wave cinema of the late 1950s and 1960s influenced many filmmakers to break with classical forms and techniques, as well as to address the political and social discord of the era. The Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the events at Kent State segmented young audiences, making it difficult for producers to pinpoint an audience as they had in the past. Scheiner quotes producer Sam Arkoff who stated, “I don’t think our audience is the same audience anymore for two different pictures. Each picture must be attractive to some segment of youth.... You must aim dead center at what you consider your audience for a specific picture.”<sup>10</sup> The reemergence of the feminist movement and the debut of the birth control pill worked as catalysts toward change in Hollywood’s treatment of sex during the 1960s, while the radical approach of the French New Wave appealed to discontented American youth. Scrambling to reach changing audiences, studio heads became more open to the creativity of a new generation of filmmakers—fresh out of film schools—whom they hoped could represent on screen the countercultures that youth so longed to see reflected.

Though divided by politics and social trends, teens continued to constitute the largest portion of movie-going audiences throughout the 1970s and 1980s. According to

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<sup>10</sup> Arkoff quoted in Scheiner, 140.



Shary, “After the sexual revolution of the ‘60s gave rise to the late-‘70s disco era in which adults were encouraged to revel in a number of excesses, youth seemed to be pushed toward the same moral loosening.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, youth featured much less prominently in films of the 1970s—the decade marked by the huge successes of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977). Following this lull in depictions of teen culture, however, adolescent sexuality became the focus for films geared at youth. While audiences of the mid- to late 1990s would seek the diversity of content and counterculture aesthetics of independent films, Hollywood producers resorted to sex-quest narratives throughout the eighties when they could determine no better way of appealing to a majority of teens.

### **Sex in the 1980s**

The turn toward teen audiences and sex-quest comedies by the commercial film industry in the 1980s reflected increased public awareness of and moral panic over teen sex. Perspectives on teen sexuality and representation throughout the 1980s felt the impact of concurrent debates over anti-pornography legislation, the feminist movement against child sexual abuse, pro-sex feminism, and panic over rising rates of teen pregnancy and risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. According to Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter:

The core of the feminist debate about pornography occurred during a ten-year bell curve: from the founding of Women Against Violence Against Women in 1976, to the peak intensity generated by the adoption of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon’s censorial law in 1984, to the denouement in 1986, when the Supreme Court ruled that law unconstitutional.<sup>12</sup>

At the request of the Minneapolis city council in 1983, radical feminists Dworkin and MacKinnon drafted a civil law to treat pornography as sex discrimination “on the grounds that pornography promotes violence against women, keeps women subordinate,

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<sup>11</sup> Shary 2002a, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Duggan & Hunter, 16.

and inhibits access to equal employment, education, and opportunity.”<sup>13</sup> The ensuing debates over whether or not pornography should be regulated and censored divided feminists on issues of sexuality, physical violence, free speech, and the roles of law and media in depicting violence and explicit sexuality and protecting people from those depictions. Medical anthropologist Carole S. Vance illuminated the damaging social messages of such an ordinance when she exposed its traditionally sexist themes.

There are a number of familiar themes: that sex degrades women but not men; that men are raving beasts; that sex is dangerous for women; that sexuality is male and not female; that women are victims, not sexual agents; that men inflict sex on women.... What appeared novel is really the reappearance of a very traditional concern that explicit sexuality *itself* constitutes the degradation of women.<sup>14</sup>

The suggestion that the ordinance be implemented in cities across the nation brought these issues to the fore for many women and men. Pro-sex feminism envisioned women as active and desiring sexual subjects, who should be free to express their sexualities. The level of censorship in such anti-pornography ordinances threatened to limit women’s sexual expression and perpetuated the view of women as victims.

The idea that explicit representations of sexuality inherently victimize women confines women to the realm of objectification and privileges male sexuality. This is indeed a familiar theme in American society—reverberating particularly in visual culture. From billboard advertisements to popular magazines, from television to film and video (and now the Internet), sexualized images of girls and women are placed on display and at anyone’s disposal. Many radical feminists in the early 1980s viewed pornography as necessitating governmental controls. They saw it as evidence of an oppressive trend and proof of women’s victimization.

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<sup>13</sup> Blakely, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Vance, 40.

But anti-control and pro-sex feminists feared the repercussions of censorship and saw such control of pornography as a threat to cultural expression and sexual liberation. In a statement for *Ms. Magazine* in 1984, author Erika Jong writes, “I believe that censorship only springs back against the givers of culture—against authors, artists, and feminists, against anybody who wants to change society....[Feminists] would be the first to suffer.”<sup>15</sup> For Jong and others, joining in a crusade to censor cultural production contradicted the feminist goal to preserve and expand freedom of expression and agency for women whose subjectivity is, more often than not, denied. Debates over sexual equality form, for many, the foundation of women’s struggle for liberation. American women and girls are forced to carve out spaces for political and cultural expression in order to change conventional discourse surrounding female sexuality. Pro-sex feminism, in protest of the anti-pornography conservatism of the early 1980s, can be seen to have opened up such spaces for the depiction of female sexuality in popular culture.

Representations of girls’ sexuality in films of the 1980s emerged from a contentious climate in which appropriate media depictions of sex and sexuality were in constant debate and society’s conceptualization of child sexuality was undergoing complex changes. Child sexuality became an overt political issue in the 1970s with increasing concerns over child physical abuse and the impact of social movements for sexual liberation.<sup>16</sup> “By 1974, the federal courts were reflecting a broad consensus that child molestation was not a significant problem, but at just this point, other social developments were heralding another reversal of the pendulum.”<sup>17</sup> While many Americans continued to view children as purely asexual, a growing population advocated

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<sup>15</sup> Jong, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Angelides, 141-176.

<sup>17</sup> Jenkins, 118.

intergenerational sex,<sup>18</sup> freedom of sexual expression, and a belief in the seductive power of the child. The movement to prevent child sexual abuse in the late 1970s and the 1980s was a feminist development in reaction to the conceptualization of children (specifically, sexually abused, pre-adolescent girls) as seductresses to be blamed for their own victimization. Radical feminists like Florence Rush, Diana Russell, Ann Burgess, and Judith Herman had come to define child sexual abuse in terms of male power, as a violent act, rather than a sexual one—“an extension of the radical feminist definition of rape.”<sup>19</sup> Though aiming to protect children from sexual predators, this movement’s so-called redefinition of adult-child sexual encounters resulted in what Steven Angelides refers to as the “evasion” and even “erasure” of child sexuality.<sup>20</sup> The movement against child sexual abuse negated child sexuality making even more pervasive the belief in the innocent, desexualized child in 1980s’ America.

This shift, alongside changing views in representations of adult sex and sexuality in popular culture (manifest in the pornography debates), brings into focus the fascination with adolescent sexuality and loss of virginity in 1980s’ American cinema. While contemporary constructions of childhood in America rely on the negation of child sexuality, sexual desire and sexual experimentation define adolescence. In a climate of increasing tension over freedom of sexual expression, the adolescent quest for sex keeps society distracted from the troubling possibilities of childhood sexuality.

During the 1970s and 1980s, adolescent girls were given both greater privacy (manifest in a new doctor-patient confidentiality protocol that justified breaches “only in a life-threatening emergency”)<sup>21</sup> and more information regarding their own bodies and

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the North American Man-Boy Love Association gained a high public profile when it formed in 1978 in hopes of lowering or eliminating the age of consent (Jenkins, 156).

<sup>19</sup> Angelides, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Angelides, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Brumberg, 172.

sexuality. Joan Jacobs Brumberg has shown that informative guides like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973)—geared primarily toward women, but made available in public libraries across the country—published alongside popular young adult fiction, such as Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret* (1970), *Deenie* (1973), and *Forever* (1978), offered girls information about their changing bodies, menstruation, masturbation, and sex. For such information they had previously relied on female relatives and family physicians to share, or they simply never learned. There have been obvious discrepancies between the issues of sexuality openly discussed and explored in young adult fiction and what is depicted in concurrent popular cinema. While young adult novels of the 1970s delved directly into explorations of sex and sexuality, as well as identity formation in adolescence and the conflicting ideals girls face as they grow older, Hollywood constraints, such as ratings-board censors, limited popular teen films to uphold a double standard when it came to what girls and boys were allowed to do and say on screen. Social taboos surrounding female sexual subjectivity did not allow for much open dialogue between girls about their experiences with sex, desire, masturbation, or menstruation in commercial films of the 1970s.

While the rise in teen films beginning to tackle issues of sexuality in the early 1980s suggests a trend toward interest in teen sexual experiences and desires and a commercial exploitation of young, nubile bodies, it may also be indicative of more permissive parenting in which busy adults expected their kids “to be autonomous, competent, and sophisticated by the time they [were] adolescents.”<sup>22</sup> As more mothers worked outside the home, kids were expected to be responsible for themselves after school, leaving many to their own devices during evening hours. Popular girls’ magazines from the 1980s help to illustrate the new level of sexual permissiveness

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<sup>22</sup> Brumberg, 199.

allowed many teen girls. “In the 1980s, even the advice columns in such teenage magazines as *Seventeen* began to allow that protected sex—that is, intercourse with contraceptives—might be an appropriate decision in adolescence, so long as a young woman felt safe and comfortable sharing her body in this intimate way.”<sup>23</sup> Public education did little to inform girls about their own potential sexual desires, but worked to remind girls of the victimization they would suffer as their bodies changed. Michelle Fine states,

One finds an unacknowledged social ambivalence about female sexuality which ideologically separates the female sexual agent, or subject, from her counterpart, the female sexual victim. The adolescent woman of the 1980s is constructed as the latter. Educated primarily as the potential victim of male sexuality, she represents no subject in her own right.<sup>24</sup>

Consistent with this denial of both female and youth subjectivities, the abortion controversy that erupted in the late sixties continued to raise fervent debate over women’s rights to control their bodies and the government’s role in protecting women and children. The Roe versus Wade rulings allowed for the de-criminalization of abortion and led to the availability of abortion services at Planned Parenthood clinics as early as 1970. Abortion, it seemed, might become a legitimate option for dealing with unwanted pregnancy, and those against the legalization of abortion feared an increase in unprotected sex and teen pregnancy. In the 1980s, however, “with a Republican right-to-life president in the White House and new judicial appointments to the Supreme Court, state legislatures in those states that had pro-life majorities began to pass new laws restricting abortions.”<sup>25</sup> While women’s access to reproductive health services and information remained restricted in many states, the popularization of the abortion debates

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<sup>23</sup> Brumberg, 184.

<sup>24</sup> Fine & Weis, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Rubin, 267.

impacted views on sexuality and women's rights throughout the 1980s, perhaps contributing to permissiveness among parents who now envisioned their adolescent children and teens as young adults, capable of making responsible decisions about sex.

### **Amy Heckerling & *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982)**

Amy Heckerling attended film school during the early 1970s, making two successful shorts at New York University. She moved to Los Angeles in 1975 and enrolled at the American Film Institute where she made *Getting It Over With*, a short film about a nineteen-year-old woman trying to lose her virginity before she turns twenty. The short was considered for an Academy Award nomination and launched Heckerling's career in Hollywood. Soon after she began work on a feature that she had written just out of school, but the project was passed around among the studios, from Warner Bros. to Universal to MGM. It was put on hold repeatedly due to actors' strikes and lack of investors. During the process, she had befriended Universal Studios producer Art Linson who gave her Cameron Crowe's script for *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Heckerling "loved Cameron's script," stating, "When I read the material, I thought this is very real. It just knocks you over compared to the other scripts that are floating around."<sup>26</sup> In 1982, Heckerling released *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*—her first Hollywood feature—to lasting popularity and commercial success.<sup>27</sup>

The growth of the teen population and consumer-base marked the early eighties, prompting Hollywood to appeal to audiences with depictions of teen culture and desire—which frequently translated to high school melodramas, sex-quest comedies, violent action movies and bloody horror films. Few of these films were made by female

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<sup>26</sup> Cole & Dale, 112.

<sup>27</sup> According to [www.Variety.com](http://www.Variety.com), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* grossed approximately \$27 million in its 10-week run from July through October, 1982. As well as having spawned a short-lived TV series, it was widely released on video and is currently available on DVD.

directors, and few portrayed girls as powerful sexual subjects whose desires and actions deserved to be foregrounded. While it would be an oversimplification to posit that female filmmakers like Heckerling better represent girls, it has become apparent that the presence of variety behind the camera can allow for diversity of representations on screen. Diversity of representation positively works to reinforce the diversity of film audiences—rather than continuing to ignore the perspectives of those who are not white or middle-class or male or heterosexual.

Unfortunately, the barriers to be broken by women filmmakers in Hollywood are many and fortified. When asked about the specific difficulties of being a woman director in Hollywood, Heckerling replied, “I just have to think of what I want to do, what I want to express, and not think about what this town thinks of me as a woman.... [As] soon as you start thinking in terms of ‘I’m a woman’...then I think you’re pigeonholing yourself.”<sup>28</sup> As Heckerling sees it, being categorized as a director of one particular genre is to be avoided. After making *Fast Times*, she took on the *Johnny Dangerously* script. “It was guys with guns, and was very rowdy and dirty. I thought, ‘This is different. They’re not going to think of me as “girl-loses-virginity” if they see this.’”<sup>29</sup> As a woman in a male-dominated industry, Heckerling thought early in her career that she would struggle against masculinist assumptions that she would not be as capable or versatile as male directors. Though she has made it clear in interviews that she is not interested in systematically pursuing realistic portrayals of girlhood<sup>30</sup> or feminist social commentary with her filmmaking, Heckerling generated both to some degree in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

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<sup>28</sup> Cole & Dale, 115.

<sup>29</sup> Cole & Dale, 114.

<sup>30</sup> Cohen, 53.



The film relies on a conventional coming-of-age narrative and functions well within the commercial teen comedy genre of the early eighties. When asked about the female perspectives in *Fast Times*, Heckerling conveyed her belief that the film exhibits both male and female perspectives but admits to the film's male-dominated cast. "Well what happened on *Fast Times* was a good cross-sampling of both male and female perspectives. There were two girls and four boys who were primary characters."<sup>31</sup> Regardless of Heckerling's hesitancy to claim the film is even remotely aligned with feminist politics, at moments in *Fast Times* sex is represented from the perspective of the teen female protagonist—a rarity in commercial cinema. Her depictions of sex avoid traditional female objectification within an otherwise conventional commercial Hollywood narrative, altering the landscape of girls' sexuality and desire in popular cinema and public discourse. A 1985 issue of *Ms.* points to *Fast Times* as the only teen movie in which "the sex is shown as clumsy and awkward—and it was directed by a woman.... This is hardly the kind of sex you'll catch in any of the other hundreds of teen movies around today."<sup>32</sup> After the near-absence of girls and/or teen sex in Hollywood films of the 1970s, and against a strong current of female objectification in 1980s Hollywood films, Heckerling's 1982 comedic teen romance depicts sex from its sexually-active heroine's perspective in order to reflect the lived experiences of some adolescent girls in contemporary America.

Critically, *Fast Times* was not entirely well received. Reviews in *Variety* and *The New York Times* stress the lack of a primary character and the fragmented plot and refer to "Miss Heckerling's" inability to achieve "something other than a cheerful, casually diverting movie" due to the film's lack of "anything raw."<sup>33</sup> These claims extend from a

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<sup>31</sup> Cole & Dale, 116.

<sup>32</sup> Crichton, 90.

<sup>33</sup> Maslin, C6:1.

discourse surrounding teen culture at the time, which increasingly envisioned teens as alien, irresponsible, and at the mercy of the dangerous desires incited by popular media. In 1985, *U.S. News & World Report* featured an issue devoted to youth and the impact of popular music, TV, and cinema. One article stated that “[the] pleasures purveyed to the young today through records, television, videos and films are so provocative that parents are in an uproar, psychologists are warning of dire consequences, entertainment producers are fearful of threats to free speech and politicians are pondering solutions that question First Amendment rights.”<sup>34</sup> Such reports perpetuated stereotypes of teens as passive consumers and of teen girls as feeling powerful only through sexual activity.

Critics reviewing *Fast Times* refused to place Stacy Hamilton (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) as the film’s main character as a result of such pervasive stereotyping, as well as the dearth of female protagonists in commercial teen sex comedies. While critics recognize that *Fast Times* distinguishes itself from the “nudie-cutie”<sup>35</sup> teen sex comedies of the time, they fail to see it as a variation on the theme—different from the others because it incorporates a teen girl’s perspective of sex. While critics may have felt that the film lacked grit, one makes it a point to mention an “abortion scene and some explicit sexual episodes”<sup>36</sup> that were cut from the film in order to garner an “R” rating from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).<sup>37</sup> While the MPAA required that any graphic depiction of Stacy’s ordeal in the abortion clinic be cut from the film, Heckerling’s choice to downplay the episode rather than overdramatize it makes the

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<sup>34</sup> Powell, 46-49.

<sup>35</sup> “*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*: For young runners” *Variety* August 18, 1982. Examples include *Porky’s* (1981), *The Last American Virgin* (1982), and *Screwballs* (1983).

<sup>36</sup> Maslin, C6:1.

<sup>37</sup> *Fast Times* was released just two years prior to the introduction of the “PG-13” rating. The “R” rating restricted audiences to those over sixteen years old, unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. Generally though, teens could gain entrance to the “R”-rated movies they wanted to watch, regardless of age. And those who did not see them in theatres could rent them later on video.

scene as strong as it could be under the constraints of the ratings board. Instead of being a sentimental show of heart-wrenching emotion, Stacy's choice to have an abortion becomes matter-of-fact—almost mundane; the procedure itself remains invisible, unknowable, a frightening and unfortunate consequence of sex nonetheless. Pressure from the ratings board helped determine the film's treatment of abortion and sex, but as I will discuss in chapter two, Heckerling ultimately incorporates powerful moments of teen female agency and subjectivity when it comes to dealing with sex.

While Heckerling worked in commercial Hollywood—with a male writer and male producers—to make *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk* was made independently—from a novel by Joyce Carol Oates—perhaps allowing for a more open depiction of one girl's struggle to express and/or contain her sexual desires. *Fast Times'* ensemble cast and devotion to contemporary teen culture works to temper the foregrounding of girls' sexual initiation, distracting audiences with comic relief and references to popular culture. In contrast, *Smooth Talk* is a melodrama less concerned with stereotypical teen life than with the difficulties of adolescent female sexual desires that remain unnamed and unexplored in the lives of many girls.

### **Joyce Chopra & *Smooth Talk* (1985)**

Joyce Chopra developed a name for herself in the feminist filmmaking community during the seventies with her documentary work. She began as an apprentice to cinema vérité documentarian D.A. Pennebaker in the early 1960s, but her passion was for feature-length fiction films. “The way I got to do *Happy Mother's Day* [a vérité film, which Chopra recorded sound on and coproduced in 1963] was he got some nice woman he knew, me, to take sound.”<sup>38</sup> While the features she produced in the late 1960s did not have feminist messages, she returned to documentaries to produce her feminist

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<sup>38</sup> Rosenberg, 35.

autobiographical portrait *Joyce at 34* in 1972, which feminist distribution company, New Day, acquired. She made three other feminist documentaries in the mid-1970s.<sup>39</sup> Her three short documentaries from that period, particularly *Girls at 12* (1975), focus on the lives of young women and girls. Jan Rosenberg has written of Chopra that “[she] has purposefully and thoughtfully developed an aesthetic built on her feminism.”<sup>40</sup>

In pursuit of her earlier dream of making narrative films, Chopra partnered with her writer husband, Tom Cole, to create a film adaptation of Joyce Carol Oates’s haunting and sparse story, *Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?* The result of their efforts, *Smooth Talk*, was independently produced by Martin Rosen and distributed (by Goldcrest Films and American Playhouse) to only between one and three theatres in Los Angeles, achieving what *Variety* refers to as “exclusive” market saturation. The film had a low budget relative to studio productions, like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and was not heavily marketed to the general public. Its audiences most likely consisted of teenage girls (the film is rated PG-13) and adults who followed independent film. The film was released to video and later transferred to DVD, making it available for rental and purchase. Chopra was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award as Best Director for her work on *Smooth Talk*, and the film won Best Dramatic Picture at the Sundance Film Festival in 1985. Though successful with audiences as well as with critics, in terms of market saturation and box office revenues, it could not compete with Hollywood contemporaries.<sup>41</sup> Still, *Smooth Talk* stood out as a coming-of-age portrait from a girls’ perspective when few films granted girls sexual subjectivity.

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<sup>39</sup> *Matina Horner, Portrait of a Person* (1974), *Girls at 12* (1975), *Chlorae and Albie* (1976)

<sup>40</sup> Rosenberg, 37.

<sup>41</sup> During opening weekend for *Smooth Talk* (November 15, 1985), box office revenues for teen films also playing were as follows: *Back to the Future*, \$2,401,470; *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, \$1,412,655; *Better Off Dead*, \$651,858; *Teen Wolf* \$238,299. *Smooth Talk* grossed \$16,785 that weekend. (Figures taken from [www.Variety.com](http://www.Variety.com)).

Girls have long faced conflicting pressures to be sexually active and attractive and also to avoid promiscuity, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Brumberg states that “American girls have to negotiate between their desire for sexual expression and the prospect of sexual danger.”<sup>42</sup> *Smooth Talk* complicates the idea of the virginal girl as asexual child while it sexualizes the girl on the verge of womanhood. Thus, its protagonist, Connie Wyatt (played by Laura Dern), inhabits the transitional liminality of adolescence, seemingly bound only by her level of sexual knowledge. In *Smooth Talk*, Connie sees and feels the physical changes of adolescence, but she is unsure of her ability to control or repress the desires that accompany her maturing body—as society seems to demand that she do. For Chopra, Connie’s longing and her aspiration toward independence speak to the adolescent experience. “Connie has all this welled-up desire for expression and no one to connect with. Connie, to me, is a heroine full of hopes and longing.... It’s important to me that Connie is not a victim,” says Chopra in a 1985 interview.<sup>43</sup> Chopra talks about the satisfaction of having audience members approach her to share their own stories of sexual initiation—stories that don’t get told often. Our society’s silence surrounding female sexual subjectivity has positioned women as passive and female sexuality as “to be seen and not heard.”<sup>44</sup> *Smooth Talk* attempts to subvert Hollywood conventions, which frequently negate girls’ sexual subjectivity in favor of masculine desire. In some ways the film adheres to conventional portrayals of girls’ sexuality as dangerous and envisions the adolescent girl in passive transition from innocence to adulthood through heterosexual initiation to sex, gifted by a man. However, the film also allows for the recuperation of power via a female protagonist who determines for herself the meaning of power as she refuses to be victimized by that man.

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<sup>42</sup> Brumberg, 142-143.

<sup>43</sup> Chopra 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131.

Chopra's use of close-ups, cinematography, and mise-en-scène in *Smooth Talk* is similar to that of commercial directors whose films objectify girls and women; however, spectators can see—especially in the “claustrophobic” close-ups—Connie growing into her desire and experimenting with her identity as a sexual young woman, rather than falling victim to the desires of the men around her. While *Smooth Talk* received many positive reviews in the press, feminist critic B. Ruby Rich indicts Chopra for making a film “with a message for teenage daughters everywhere: Keep a lid on your sexuality, don't you dare express it, don't you ever act out those ‘trashy daydreams’ (as Connie's mother puts it) or you'll get it.”<sup>45</sup> Yet even as Connie plays out the less-than-sophisticated experiences and feelings of her adolescence, she is a powerful heroine. My analysis of *Smooth Talk* in chapter two elaborates on the ways in which Connie's story is one of survival rather than victimization, but Rich sees Connie's coercion and rape by an older man as punishment for her curiosity about sex. (In comparison, Stacy, in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, must deal with unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and the cowardice of the boy she had sex with as negative consequences of becoming sexually active.) Though Rich fails to discuss the ways in which Connie takes active control of her sexual desires and rejects victimization, Rich astutely points up the “pre-feminist” leanings of a film that, much like *Fast Times* and many other commercial teen films, ultimately attempts to punish its girl protagonist for her curiosity about sex and her willingness to express desire.

Panic over rising teen pregnancy rates, rampant drug and alcohol use, and a high rate of suicide among teens throughout the 1970s and 1980s pointed to a need for better understanding of the views and experiences of late twentieth-century youth. Though teens

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<sup>45</sup> Rich, 345.

constituted over half of the movie-going population in the mid-eighties,<sup>46</sup> growing awareness of AIDS resulted in “a dramatic decline in the number of youth films featuring the loss of virginity” by 1985.<sup>47</sup> Teens were increasingly sexually active, resulting in pregnancy for one in ten girls in 1986,<sup>48</sup> which appeared to impact suicide rates. Jerold M. Starr reveals that “one-fourth of female minors who attempt suicide (well over 100,000 a year) do so because they are or believe they are pregnant.”<sup>49</sup> The serious, even tragic, dangers of sex appeared too immediate to ignore. While the playful sex-quest subgenre waned, more serious romantic narratives about teen desire like *Lucas* (1986), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *China Girl* (1987) earned commercial success at the box office.

Few of these films could be called feminist...and are more often sexist in their portrayals of young women's exploitation by young men, or at least their formal imaging of girls' bodies, which are held up for voyeuristic pleasure by the male gaze in much greater proportion than the number of boys who are photographed for the opposite purpose.<sup>50</sup>

This view of teen cinema at the time reveals what a rare exception *Smooth Talk* was in its depictions of a girl's sexual desires. The film not only worked to foreground a girl's perspective, but also manipulated the conventions of filmed objectification into something completely different, exposing the voyeuristic nature of popular cinema. Chopra turned Hollywood conventions on end by using them to demonstrate how a girl might envision herself and her own experiences. While her film is part of a trend toward more sensitive and serious portrayals of teen sexuality, it does not fall back on romance in the way that concurrent teen films did when trying to tackle issues of sex and

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<sup>46</sup> Starr, 335.

<sup>47</sup> Shary 2002, 227.

<sup>48</sup> Starr, 337.

<sup>49</sup> Starr, 338.

<sup>50</sup> Shary 2002, 214.

sexuality. In chapter two, I delve into the film as text to flesh out its depiction of girls' sexual desires, as well as to analyze sexual initiation and the use of romance in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.



## Chapter 2

### **Losin' It: Surviving Sexual Initiation in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) & *Smooth Talk* (1985)**

American popular cinema of the 1980s was bursting at the seams to let flow a rush of teen films, amidst the myriad other media and consumer products catering to the growing teen market of the time. The boom in teenage population along with changes in the Hollywood ratings system and changing concepts of sexuality in American society all contributed to the focus on sex, romance, and high school culture in teen cinema. Film ratings were in flux during the 1980s, evident in the addition of the “PG-13” rating in 1984 to create a much-needed middle ground between the “PG” and “R” ratings. Teen films of the early eighties were often rated “R” due to sexual content, but after 1984 films with similar content could be edited to earn the less restrictive “PG-13” rating, making them more accessible to lucrative teen audiences without sacrificing teen appeal. Shortly thereafter in 1985, concerns over HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy were amplified enough to alter the cultural landscape so that teen films took a turn toward romance and away from casual attitudes about sex.<sup>1</sup>

*Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), directed by Amy Heckerling, is an early 1980s’ example of high school comedy with a vein of intensity in which it considers—more realistically than many of its contemporaries—teenage experiences of sexual initiation, abortion, and heartbreak from a girl’s perspective. *Smooth Talk* (1985), directed by Joyce Chopra, works to foreground the sexual desires of an adolescent girl at a time when sex was increasingly viewed as dangerous and girls and women were

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<sup>1</sup> Shary 2002, 211

continually constructed as victims. While I do not mean to suggest that these two films form a trend of any kind, nor that they necessarily be discussed in comparison to one another, each in its own ways illustrates the emergence of a more realistic representation of adolescent female sexual subjectivity in late twentieth-century American cinema. Each film also addresses issues of loss of virginity in adolescence, speaking to Catherine Driscoll's theorization, which opposes the traditional social construction of loss of virginity as the singular moment in which a girl passes into mature womanhood.

The virgin incorporates and represents feminine adolescence as a moment rather than a process: defloration, annunciation, or the prolonged passive suspension before these arrivals frozen in the image of an ideal. Virginity minimizes the significance of feminine adolescence and designates girls' maturity as something gifted by men.<sup>2</sup>

While *Smooth Talk* may represent female adolescence as a sort of passive suspension before the arrival of defloration, the female adolescent experience does not necessarily culminate in loss of virginity and is ultimately defined by the heroine's own desires. *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* also depicts the experiences of an active heroine for whom loss of virginity is only the beginning of her exploration of sex and sexual desire during adolescence. By analyzing these texts, I hope to expand the conversation about girls' representation in films as well as to illuminate the impact of the women who directed these films on representations of girls in commercial and independent cinema. I devote this chapter, then, to closely reading *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Smooth Talk* for a discussion of the ways in which each depicts adolescent female subjectivities related specifically to girls' sexual desires and experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Driscoll, 141.

### ***Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982)***

Stacy Hamilton (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Linda Barrett (Phoebe Cates) discuss relationships and flirt with customers while they earn spending money after school at “the best food stand in the mall.” Stacy’s older brother, Brad (Judge Reinhold), plots his senior year social life from behind various fast food counters, having progressed from the mall scene out into the world of franchises like All-American Burger. Mark “Rat” Ratner (Brian Backer) gazes longingly at Stacy from the other side of the mall, where he works as assistant to the Assistant Manager of the movie theatre. Mark’s friend Mike Damone (Robert Romanus) hangs out at the mall scalping concert tickets and offering dating advice to the other kids. And Jeff Spicoli (Sean Penn) and his surfing buddies stop at All-American Burger to stave off their drug-induced munchies. These are the primary characters of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Most of the action takes place at Stacy and Brad’s house (around the pool), the food court in the mall, and, of course, at the high school. The opening sequence introduces these characters at work and leisure in the hours after school is out, setting up the local mall as the hub of teen life.

The dynamic of Stacy’s friendship with Linda is established within the first few moments of the film. The initial glimpse of the pair is in the food court as Linda zips up Stacy’s uniform for her. In the following scenes, Linda advises Stacy about how to pursue a handsome customer so that Stacy can get on with her sex life. “Stace, why don’t you just call him.... What are you waiting for? You’re fifteen years old! I did it when I was thirteen.” Stacy is inexperienced, curious, and grateful for the advice and support. While a similar relationship between Mark and Damone is also revealed in the introductory sequence, the non-diegetic soundtrack privileges Stacy’s story more than anyone else’s. Jackson Browne’s “Somebody’s Baby” (twice), Don Henley’s “Love Rules,” and Tom Petty’s “American Girl” form Stacy’s score, punctuating pivotal scenes

like Stacy's first day at Ridgemont High School, her sexual initiation at The Point, and her attempts to seduce Damone in the pool house and Mark in her bedroom. Clearly, this is a sort of coming-of-age story that, while it incorporates an ensemble cast of characters, focuses in its most serious moments on the experiences and perspective of its teen girl protagonist, Stacy.

Many of the teen narratives that became popular during the early 1980s, such as *Porky's* (1981), *Goin' All the Way* (1981), *Paradise Motel* (1983), and *Hot Moves* (1984), were sex-quest films in which a teen boy or group of boys spent the duration of the film seeking out sexual conquests, the culmination of that quest being heterosexual sex. But Stacy's story is quite a bit different. Instead of seeking out sex for the sake of sex, Stacy experiments with sex early in the film and determines in the end that she wants something more—romance, a mutually satisfying relationship. In the first sequence at the pizza stand in the mall, Stacy pursues a male customer, following Linda's tips to "laugh like you never heard anything so funny, and smile." He orders her phone number like a side of French fries with his meatball sandwich, and she sneaks out of the house later that night to meet him on a street corner. He suggests they go to The Point—a deserted baseball dugout where the kids go to make out. She agrees, knowing that they will have sex. She has just started high school—she feels ready for sex, thinking perhaps that it will be the passionate, romantic event that she's heard about in her favorite songs and discussed with her more experienced friend, Linda, or at least that it will be enjoyable.

But as Heckerling's direction conveys, first sex is not as Stacy had hoped. In fact, from Stacy's point of view, it is downright uncomfortable and unengaging. Like many sex scenes in popular film, first is the tender kiss and then the surrender of a young woman under the weight of a young man, who deftly unbuttons her shirt, baring her breasts for himself and the audience to see. But that's where the similarities end between

Stacy's first sex and sexual initiation in other popular, male-centered teen films. The camera focuses on Stacy's expression as she watches Ron move on top of her. She seems detached, wondering what will happen next. Then, a point-of-view shot of the overhead light and the fading graffiti on the cement walls reveal Stacy's eyeline. Such is the sobering vision that Stacy sees as she lays on her back in the baseball dugout, losing her virginity. Later, she reveals to Linda that sex was very painful, further verifying what is obvious in the stark depiction of her experience. By privileging Stacy's perspective and her reactions, Heckerling crafts a chillingly accurate account of a teen girl's first sexual encounter that holds true to the character rather than offering her up piece by piece for fetishization. Laura Mulvey argues, "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed...."<sup>3</sup> While there are certainly moments in *Fast Times* in which the role of female bodies is determined by the "male gaze," those moments do not involve Stacy's body. The representation of her body is not wholly or singularly determined by that gaze but is determined by Stacy's own point-of-view and experience. In contrast, other films typically depict first sex as painless, sometimes pleasurable for girls.

While Linda's body does serve as the object of male desire—specifically for Stacy's brother Brad and for audiences who find pleasure in watching his fantasy unfold on screen—her power of subjectivity is eventually recuperated. In Brad's fantasy, Linda emerges from his family's swimming pool, dripping wet in her red bikini. She approaches him, telling him she thinks he's cute, showing him her breasts, and kissing him. He is wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, having just returned home from work—not at All-American Burger or Fish 'n Chips, but from some imaginary office.

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<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, 33.

Here, the American dream of the middle-class, teenage male in the early 1980s is to have a beautiful, half-naked girl waiting to please him when he comes home from work. And success occurs, not in the service industry where most of the teens at Ridgemont High work, but in a professional career that requires him to wear a suit and carry a briefcase of papers home in the evening—a career in which he dreams he might attract such a girlfriend or wife with promises of financial support while she lounges by the pool.

According to Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's Marxist analysis of classical Hollywood films, "The circulation of money and its abstraction as a sign in a system of exchange serves as a mirror for woman as sign in a system of exchange.... As a system, the circulation of money embodies phallic power and the right of possession."<sup>4</sup> It makes sense then that Brad's fantasy about Linda's body is intricately linked to his fantasy of financial success. *Fast Times* perpetuates fantasies of masculine power through financial security, career success, the accoutrements of a dark suit, tie and briefcase, as well as representing a young woman as sexual object and, by extension, property with the potential to be exchanged (for instance, between Brad and Linda's long distance boyfriend, Doug; between Brad and the friends with whom he might share his fantasy; between Brad and the spectators who identify with him during this sequence). Linda plays no role in this scene other than fetishized female body; however, the fantasy crumbles instantly when the actual Linda inadvertently interrupts Brad masturbating in the bathroom, sees what he is doing, and flees. Here Heckerling subverts Hollywood narrative conventions that dictate, "[i]n order to become the subject of desire, [the female] is compelled to be the object of desire, and the images she 'chooses' remain locked within the myths of representation governed by patriarchy."<sup>5</sup> Linda abruptly

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<sup>4</sup> Cook & Johnston, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cook & Johnston, 25.

appears at the bathroom door to complicate Brad's fantasy. Rather than compounding "a highly articulated, fetishized image of herself" in order to "transform her status as object for exchange," Linda intervenes to complicate Brad's fetishization of her body.<sup>6</sup> If woman in film is "something that is missing that must be located so that the narcissistic aim of the male protagonist can be achieved," then Linda's abrupt interruption of Brad's fantasy works to replace the fetishized image and locate her as a subject in the physical world, capable of her own actions, voice, and desire.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Heckerling's message is that Linda may be the object of boys' desires—a symbol for exchange between males—but she is not only symbolic; she is not without desires and actions of her own.

Similarly, while Stacy's early determination to lose her virginity is not depicted as particularly active, she soon reveals her subjective power through her active pursuit of Mark and Damone. *Fast Times* makes it seem as if sex is available and inevitable just around the corner for these girls, as well as for their partners—teen boys and twenty-something men. In the aftermath of hasty sexual initiation, however, Stacy becomes vocal about what she desires and takes steps to obtain it. A powerful undercurrent of pressure on teens to be mature, adult, self-sufficient, and experienced echoes throughout the film. It is evident in Brad's dream of achieving a conservative, capitalist, upper-middle-class ideal; it is obvious in Linda's preoccupation with older men versus high school boys; and it is manifest in Stacy's attempts to force herself into mature womanhood by gaining sexual experience, working, and, finally, by pursuing a supportive relationship. "The definition of feminine sexuality by the goal of mature genital womanhood relies on an equation of virginity and feminine adolescence. The virgin is both emblematic of the future and has no future of her own if the only possible future for a girl is sexual activity,

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<sup>6</sup> Cook & Johnston, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Cook & Johnston, 20.

ostensibly unavailable to virgins.”<sup>8</sup> Stacy’s virginity is constructed as an albatross early in the narrative—something to shrug off in order to achieve womanhood. As a virgin, society (represented by her friend Linda) views her as naïve, immature, “such a baby.” Thus Stacy assumes that sexual intercourse is the key to maturity, and yet her initiation into womanhood via sex does not change the fact that she simultaneously experiences adolescence. While adolescence may pivot on loss of virginity as a rite of passage, sexual activity is increasingly incorporated in films as a normalized part of the teen years. The assumption of teen sex complicates traditional notions of childhood and blurs transitions from youth into adulthood by acknowledging the impossible liminality of adolescence as defined by virginity. Representations such as those in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* problematize the construction of the virgin as quickly transformed into a mature woman in the moment of sexual initiation by playing out Stacy’s sexual explorations.

When her older suitor stops calling, Stacy has her first high school date with Mark. In traditional fashion, he picks her up and takes her out for dinner. They sit across from each other in oversized chairs. The furniture and their imposing server dwarf them—they appear as young children playing at being adults. When Mark realizes he has forgotten his wallet, Damone comes to the rescue. He saunters in, casually delivers the wallet and, standing over the table, introduces himself to Stacy. He takes the liberty of sampling her food, biting into a pepper that bursts with juices, perhaps foreshadowing his later encounter with Stacy in the pool house. But in this evening, Stacy’s attentions are on Mark. She invites him into her home and explains that her parents are out of town. She asks him to unzip her dress so that she can change clothes. She reappears in a bathrobe and begins showing him childhood photo albums, continuously performing mature womanhood. They bond over school memories and start to kiss. She pulls him back onto

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<sup>8</sup> Driscoll, 141.



her bed and tugs at his pants, but Mark is nervous. He makes an excuse and leaves in a hurry. Stacy's aggressive sexual advances clearly overwhelm Mark. If the roles were reversed, Stacy might be represented as submitting to Mark's desires, but, in this case, Stacy's physical articulation of her desire for sex is frightening to the unassuming and less experienced Mark. Cook and Johnston theorize the emasculating female protagonist, explaining, "She represents at one and the same time the distant memory of maternal plenitude and the fetishized object of [the male hero's] fantasy of castration—a phallic replacement and thus a threat."<sup>9</sup> Stacy's failed seduction of Mark plainly draws connections between the sexually assertive female and the emasculation and castration of the unsuspecting male, positing female sexual desire as a threat to masculinity. Stacy assumes that Mark does not like her because he does not initiate contact or reciprocate her advances. She has no frame of reference for imagining a boy without sexual experience. She would feel validated if he had responded in kind, but instead she moves on to someone else.

Stacy pursues Damone after school one day saying, "Mark's nice, but I think I like you." Damone walks her home, asks if she has any iced tea and follows her inside. She invites him to go swimming, then leads him into the changing room, where she holds a pair of Brad's swim trunks up to him to see if they will fit. Damone kisses Stacy, they compliment each other's skills, and she asks him if he wants to take off his clothes. He says, "You first," and she suggests they both undress at the same time. Cross-cutting attempts to ensure that neither body is privileged as it is exposed. However, Stacy's bared breasts and hips are perhaps more of an investment for spectators when juxtaposed against Damone's bare chest, which does not offer the same voyeuristic pleasures since men are not generally prohibited from baring their chests in public. The use of cross-

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<sup>9</sup> Cook & Johnston, 19-20.

cutting between Stacy and Damone does not promote the fragmentation of their bodies for fetishization. There is no Vaseline on this lens. They are not the overripe, tanned and toned bodies of many Hollywood sex scenes. These bodies are presented fully lit, pale, and with the youthful look of just-developed muscles, breasts, hips, and frame. Stacy's perspective is foregrounded as she and Damone have sex on the couch in the poolside changing room. The act is brief, leaving Stacy bewildered, barely disheveled and anxious when Damone climaxes quickly and rushes away. Robin Wood theorizes, "It is [Stacy] who takes the initiative, and the film suggests that this is what undermines [Damone].... Subsequently (*before* he learns that she is pregnant) he is too embarrassed to confront her, evading her friendly overtures...."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, after he learns that Stacy is pregnant and realizes that he does not have the money to help her pay for an abortion, Damone is too embarrassed or cowardly to talk to her or give her a ride to the clinic.

Pregnancy is one of several consequences of sex, along with physical violence, abandonment, and humiliation, employed by popular narrative films to punish female characters for sexual desires or even for being desirable.<sup>11</sup> However, Stacy's pregnancy is not simply a device for the suppression of female desire. Instead, it works to emphasize the naïveté of the film's sex-obsessed teens, while offering a pro-choice depiction of abortion. Stacy convinces Damone to pay for half of the service and give her a ride to the clinic, but he does not show up when it is time for the appointment. Stacy gets the abortion without Damone's help or support. The procedure is not discussed or depicted. In fact, there is only a single scene at the abortion clinic. There is no melodramatic exploration of the moments leading up to or following the operation. The scene is devoted to the positive, unembellished portrayal of the clinic experience and to the

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<sup>10</sup> Wood, 196.

<sup>11</sup> Scheiner 2000.

reinforcement of Stacy's autonomy. A nurse visits Stacy in a quiet, private recovery room, where she sits, fully dressed and ready to leave. But she's not allowed to go without someone there to pick her up. Knowing that she will have to find her own way home, Stacy assures the nurse that her boyfriend is waiting outside. Stacy leaves looking pale and tired but otherwise unscathed. Much to her surprise, Brad is standing in the parking lot, waiting to take her home. He promises not to tell their parents, but Stacy does not disclose the details of her situation. When Linda offers to take revenge on Damone for abandoning her, Stacy begs her not to. Though, clearly, Stacy has been through an ordeal, she is strong and self-reliant. Her emotional life remains somewhat of a mystery, as the film does not dramatize or sensationalize her anxieties in order to feminize her, but focuses on her active agency—often in contrast to the passivity of male characters.

Though she has become sexually active, Stacy has not suddenly transformed into the sophisticated, self-assured woman she thought she would become. Her pursuit of boys has failed to fulfill her and has led her to understand that sex is not exactly what she wants. Although Stacy ultimately chooses a romantic relationship with Mark that does not necessarily involve sex, the film introduces the possibility of sex-positive teen girlhood, complicating assumptions that girls and women are naturally inclined to prefer romance over sex. From early in the narrative, both Linda and Stacy work to subvert what Wood refers to as one of the primary tenets of the 1980s' high school genre—indeed, of Hollywood writ large—namely, the assumption of “male as hunter, female as hunted, male as looker, female as looked-at.”<sup>12</sup> Linda is introduced as a hunter within the film's introductory sequence when she spots a guy at the mall: “Did you see his cute little butt?” And Stacy initiates intimacy with Damone and with Mark. In a stereotypical teen comedy, Mark, the male virgin, would be on a quest for sex to validate

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<sup>12</sup> Wood, 193.

his masculinity. And, Stacy's advances would not put off Damone, the supposed lady's man. However, both Mark and Damone react to Stacy's desires in ways that contradict the genre's conventions. Stacy's sexuality scares Mark away; her straightforward advances undermine Damone's prowess. (Similarly passive are Brad when he waits for his girlfriend to break up with him, though he wants to be single; Linda's long-distance boyfriend, Doug, who is never depicted and who breaks up with Linda in a letter; and Spicoli, who fantasizes about bikini-clad women but does not interact with actual girls or women.) Stacy and Linda have refused their role as the hunted to usurp the typically male position of hunter. Even so, it is not until Stacy decides to stop "hunting" that she grows nearer to actual womanhood, having begun to understand the futility of pursuing the mythic ideal of mature femininity so potent in adolescence.

Carol Gilligan theorizes adolescence as "a time when girls are pressed from within and without to take in and take on the interpretive framework of patriarchy and to regulate their sexuality, their relationships, their desires and their judgments in its terms."<sup>13</sup> If patriarchal discourse is based on autonomy, individuality, and disconnection, her "feminist ethic of care" relies on relational discourse that envisions connections between individuals as necessary to life. Here, the female adolescent struggle lies in determining ways in which to sate desires to feel connected via romantic or sexual relationships within a framework that denies such desire. Stacy's assertion of her desires as they change throughout *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is at once symptomatic of and subversive toward the patriarchal framework in which the film operates. She first attempts to fulfill her desires by lying about her age to an older guy in order to lose her virginity—a forfeiture which is supposed to make her feel mature, empowered,

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<sup>13</sup> Gilligan 1995, 124.

sophisticated and attractive to other men. She does not regret her decision to have sex but is bothered when it does not result in a lasting relationship.

For Gilligan, adolescence is a major transition in women's lives, which "because women's sense of integrity appears entwined with an ethic of care, so that, to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection...would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care."<sup>14</sup> Stacy has begun to realize that she wants more than just to serve her own physical desires. While she is able to articulate her desires, assert herself to explore them and take responsibility for their consequences, Stacy's primary motivation is to find a boyfriend. She chides Linda when things don't work out as expected. "You're the one who said I'd get a boyfriend at the mall." Stacy is a rare 1980s' popular representation of a sexually active teen girl whose confidence and agency are not compromised to make her the victim of her desires. Instead, Stacy is only the victim of Damone's cowardice when she has to deal with abortion on her own. In this way, Stacy is forced into independence—forced to operate autonomously to protect herself and her own interests, though, ultimately the film resolves her struggle by connecting her to Mark through a monogamous romantic relationship and to Brad through sibling support and care.

### ***Smooth Talk (1985)***

Deborah Tolman studies adolescent female sexual desire by talking with American girls about their experiences. She posits that, "Because the absence of active embodied sexual desire is a hallmark of femininity, one specific developmental dilemma for girls in adolescence is the dilemma of desire."<sup>15</sup> Though a majority of adolescent girls struggle to reconcile the conflicting ideals of virginal femininity (i.e., girlhood) and

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<sup>14</sup> Gilligan 1982, 171.

<sup>15</sup> Tolman, 54-55.

female sexuality (i.e., womanhood), rarely are sexually active girls represented positively in popular culture. Joyce Chopra's *Smooth Talk* attempts to empower its protagonist by depicting her active search for sexual intimacy and male attention. Connie Wyatt (played by Laura Dern) experiments with seduction and pursues boys and men at the mall and at the drive-in while attempting to deal with the repressive attitudes of family and friends. In the final scenes of the film there lies the suggestion that Connie has been punished for her sexuality, as in so many representations of sexually active girls before (and since). But this portrayal does offer Connie agency by allowing her to express herself as a sexual subject with her own desires and by giving her the power to determine whether she is a survivor or a victim.

Fifteen-year-old Connie is overwhelmed by sexual desires and frustrated with the banality of her middle-class life at home. She lives with her parents (played by Mary Kay Place and Levon Helm) and her older sister, June (Elizabeth Berridge), in an unfinished house on a citrus grove in Northern California. Connie is out of school for the summer, expending most of her energy at the mall with her friends or chasing boys at the beach and local drive-in. Like many kids her age, she can not wait to have her driver's license and the freedom of going where she pleases, when she pleases. She lives much of the time in a daydream of pop songs, beaches, affectionate boys, and—one can assume—oblivious parents. Connie's mom has decided to spend the summer fixing up the house, but is incapable of making Connie help with the project. Connie's older sister, June, teaches at Connie's high school and, according to their mother, "is wonderful. June is an angel." She plays frumpy, passionless good-girl foil to Connie's restless flirt. June acts as a third parent saying, "Dad, you really should do something about Connie." But neither she nor Mom or Dad tries to determine how best to communicate with Connie about the changes she's going through, and no one seems interested in listening to what

Connie has to say. Dad shuffles happily to and from work and the dinner table, where he and Mom perform just the kind of familiar, stagnant, unromantic interaction that Connie longs to escape. Save for a few moments of father-daughter bonding, Dad manages to remain casually uninvolved in this daughter's life.

The initial shot of the film depicts Connie with her friends Jill and Laura asleep on an otherwise deserted beach in their bathing suits as the sun begins to set. The camera slowly pans from water lapping at the shore, crawling up the beach to three pairs of bare, female legs, and we begin to wonder if the dimming sunlight signifies dawn or evening. Have these girls slept on the beach all night? How did they get there the night before, and what were they doing? We barely have time to wonder what they might be dreaming about when they awaken and scramble to reach the mall to catch their ride home. They shake their hips at the side of the road and hitchhike across the bay to await Laura's mother at the mall. Like the other parents in the film, Laura's mom can only wonder what secret the girls laugh about in the back seat. She has no idea what they have been up to. The girls all come from middle-class homes, which affords them leisure time and relative freedom from demands at home or elsewhere. They create their own world of shared experiences in which they are free to act on impulses and use their bodies in ways that might make their families uncomfortable. In many ways, Connie and her friends create their own more exciting reality to parallel the mundane realities they face at home.

In *Smooth Talk*, home life is repressive and fragmented—something from which Connie is compelled to pull away in order to come to terms with her sexuality. She becomes lost in music and prefers to dance rather than argue; she plays flirting games with different boys (and men) at the mall and the drive-in; she falls asleep on the beach; she daydreams about being old enough to drive—about the freedom of maturity. In attempts to learn how to express her feelings, Connie practices her performance of

feminine sexuality in front of mirrors and teases her friends about sex acts. While close-up shots, such as those during her performances in the mirror, often serve to dissect female bodies into desirable, containable, fetishized pieces in popular films, these bits of Connie are not framed simply for the looking pleasure of male spectators. Instead, Connie is seen watching herself, rehearsing—her own spectator, she looks for what others notice when they see her. As Berger states, “Women watch themselves being looked at.”<sup>16</sup> Girls are socialized via popular culture to internalize the male gaze and attempt to envision themselves as others might. In this instance, Chopra has not simply given us the heteronormative male view of girlhood that Hollywood frequently regurgitates—she offers Connie’s perspective. Yet Connie’s narcissistic pleasure at looking at herself, trying to see herself as others see her and discovering how to make her body attractive to boys falls well within the heteronormative paradigm. Connie lives in a fantasy, equating sex and male attention with womanhood and independence—the things she most longs for.

The constant allusion to dream or fantasy throughout *Smooth Talk* becomes a strategy for expressing adolescent female desire when the girl (and everyone around her) is incapable of articulating it. The film’s pivotal sequence is constructed such that Connie’s daydreams and flirtations seem to conjure the villain, Arnold Friend (played by Treat Williams), out of thin air. It becomes necessary, then, to debate his existence and the events that take place between him and Connie. Connie refuses to attend a family barbecue after having been slapped by her mother in an argument over what Connie has been up to. The family is gone for the day, and Connie is left to stew in silence. She stomps through the house, tuning all the radios to her favorite station and pumping up the music to fill every room. She stands at the bottom of the stairs, raises her arms and

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<sup>16</sup> Berger, 47.



screams in frustration. Having expressed her anger at being so misunderstood by her parents, Connie begins her day. The sun is bright and blinding, the house and grounds deserted. There are no neighbors, no pets, and very little noise save for the radio that Connie takes into the front yard when she decides to sunbathe. She languishes in the grass for a while and, in one of only a few instances of non-diegetic sound throughout the film, an instrumental score is introduced as Connie tosses restlessly. The music, in contrast to Connie's high-energy rock 'n' roll songs and romantic pop ballads, suggests that Connie's search for freedom from parental authority and her longing to reach maturity via her relationships with boys will end badly. As the soundtrack shifts to an eerie non-diegetic score, the camera closes in on Connie's face. She bats away insects and rubs her eyes as if she had been sleeping, perhaps dreaming, or as the music would imply—having a nightmare. The camera movements reflect Connie's mood in this scene. The use of a handheld camera or steadycam, in a film that consists mostly of standardized, transparent, and straightforward camerawork, creates the feeling that we are watching from another character's point of view. Here, there is a sense that, although Connie is alone, someone might be—to use Wood's term again—"hunting" her.

As the day progresses, Connie sits on her bed beading a necklace, then, bored with that, sits at the top of the stairs where she can look out over the front walkway. She listens to her radio, keeping the sound low. The beating sun, deserted house, and Connie's aimlessness lend to the atmosphere of lazy daydreaming when there is little to do but lie around and wait. But the music grows louder as Connie notices a car speeding up the drive toward her. The car approaches in a cloud of dust, visible through the upstairs window. The glass muffles the sound of the car, but the radio somehow sounds clearer and louder. Arnold Friend arrives in his gold convertible. He speeds past the walk, backing up in short bursts until his car door is directly aligned with the end of the path

leading up to the house, leading straight to where Connie sits. The music from her radio becomes the music from Arnold's radio. Arnold writhes to the music as Connie opens the screen door. He echoes her youthful devotion to music, though he is clearly a decade or more older than her. Arnold and his car overwhelm the frame. The entire length of the car is visible within the frame—him behind the wheel, his name is painted on the door—and it is parked where the sidewalk ends. His car, enacting its own penetration of the suffocating safety of the home and yard, blocks the entire drive. Connie sees nowhere to go but into his car. Ultimately, his mannerisms, movements, and smooth talk overwhelm her.

Connie is happy to have company though she does not recognize Arnold. She grins and goes out to greet him. He begins to chat with her, gently insisting that she has been waiting for him. "Today's your day set aside to go for a ride with me and you know it." He speaks in casual phrases and a comfortable tone. Every movement is deliberate and slow. Arnold stretches his body over the side of the car, lurks close to Connie at one moment, and poses against the side of the car, caressing the door handle in the next. She slowly becomes wary of their conversation, as Arnold reveals that he knows the details of her life better than a stranger could. The conversation turns menacing. Arnold tells her, "I know your parents and your sister are gone somewhere. I know how long they're gonna be gone. And I know who you were with last night." While her initial impulses were to sate her curiosity about this mysterious man who has been keeping an eye on her, now she wonders just what he is after.

Connie escapes into the house, but Arnold persists, talking through the screen door. "I'll hold you so nice and tight you won't need to think anything or pretend anything. And you won't even want to get away, even if you're scared. Hell, everybody's scared the first time. That's why I'm so 'specially nice.... And I'll come inside you

where it's all secret and I'll whisper sweet things...." Connie latches the door, realizing that it will not protect her from him. She protests, "My father's coming home soon." But Arnold knows that is not true. He draws her out of the house with threats of alighting it on fire. "Just leave my family out of this." Connie decides to go with him. She sacrifices herself—her innocence—to Arnold, in order to spare her family. She walks past him, toward the car. "My sweet little blue-eyed girl." And Connie responds as she might when she is flirting with one of her dates, "What if my eyes were brown?" But this time, she knows much more is at stake—she is not laughing as she says it. This is the moment in which Connie takes control of her desires and of the dangerous situation she is in. While Arnold Friend is a predator, Connie sees a connection between his visit and her daydreams and pursuit of boys at the drive-in, where Arnold first spotted her.

Arnold looks much older and more experienced than Connie, and he has come to take advantage of her. Earlier scenes have revealed him eyeing her at the drive-in, but a shift in Connie's personality is the only cue that she is not dreaming anymore. Connie is a virgin, but she is curious about sex; she is curious about her own desires. Her mother believes that she spends her time in "trashy daydreams" and tells her so. But Connie tries desperately to hold onto her dreams and to view them as a normal part of adolescence. Driscoll theorizes that "[t]he virgin functions less as a liminal point between innocence and knowledge than between girl and woman."<sup>17</sup> While the experience of sexual initiation may offer Connie new knowledge to use in her exploration of sexuality during adolescence, it also works to alienate her from her life as a girl by forcing her into the realm of womanhood according to society's equation of the virgin with innocent girlhood versus its construction of the sexually active female with mature womanhood. Though Connie is portrayed as innocent of sex when Arnold comes to take her away and be her

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<sup>17</sup> Driscoll, 140.

“lover,” she is determined to endure the experience to make him leave. It may seem that Connie’s uncontrollable desires—her trashy dreams—lead her away with Arnold, allowing him to rape her, to take her virginity, as the narrative’s way of punishing her for pursuing boys. Instead, Connie is actively following her own desires. Though frightened of Arnold and of what might happen, she is aware of what he intends to do to her. Under the illusion that experiencing sex with a man will make her a woman, rescue her from the frustration of adolescence and the emptiness of a childhood already left behind, part of Connie wants to go with him. She determines before she reaches the end of the path that she will not be victimized. She responds to Arnold coyly, not innocently, having decided to take what she can from the situation and be done with him, even if only to feel she has saved herself and her family from further torment. In this way, the film allows for the recuperation of Connie’s subjectivity via her decision to sacrifice her virginity rather than allow Arnold to take it from her. Envisioned as risqué and dangerously sexual throughout the story, here Connie becomes courageous and powerful.

Again, Connie’s experience with Arnold may be a daydream—symbolized in a single image of Arnold’s car, empty, parked in a field. The tall grass sways in the wind—the movement, the hushed sound of it, hides something. The finality of her farewell to Arnold suggests that he coerced her into sex. Her good-bye reveals that she knows he could want nothing more from her. For B. Ruby Rich the claustrophobic framing that keeps Connie in close-up during the first half of the film helps compose “a finely observant study of adolescent female sexuality and narcissism, relations between a family and its pubescent girl-child, and most astonishingly, the combination of fear and desire (what used to be called ‘thrill’) of virginal sex,” pleasures for which “Connie—and the audience—must pay.”<sup>18</sup> Rich links Connie’s performances of femininity and sexuality

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<sup>18</sup> Rich, 344.

to her frightening association with—and loss of virginity to—Arnold. When Connie gets out of his car at the end of her driveway, she slams the door and tells him with firm resolve, “I don’t ever want to see you again.” Then, Mom, Dad, and June return home from the party. None of them sees Connie leave Arnold’s car at the end of the driveway to follow them up the walk. No one asks, “Where have you been?” Perhaps sensing that something has changed, or perhaps only to assuage the day’s guilt, Connie’s mother embraces her and apologizes for leaving her at home. Rather than reacting harshly as Connie has done before, she returns the affection, visibly relieved.

The following scene finds Connie crying into her pillow and listening to her old records. She makes amends with her sister by asking her to dance like they did when they were kids. Complicating the construction of loss of virginity as the entry point into adult womanhood, in the hours (or has it been days?) following her encounter with Arnold, Connie prefers to escape into her memories of childhood and the supposed security of home and family. While her loss of virginity—or, rather, her sacrifice of virginity—leaves her feeling ashamed, it allows Connie to see her own courage and bravery as saving the lives of her family and having survived. While, according to Driscoll, loss of virginity may not catapult Connie into womanhood, Connie seems confident, yet mellowed, more sensitive to her family—some would say more mature—after the encounter.

Though *Smooth Talk* employs some conventions of commercial teen cinema, such as a melodramatic soundtrack, its foregrounding of teen consumerism, and the use of close-ups, the film attempts to problematize Hollywood depictions of female adolescence via a subcurrent of commentary on the concept of virginity in American culture. Connie may no longer be a virgin—the experience may have changed her—but her exploration of sexuality begins when she realizes the power of her own desires and determines not to

become the victim of someone else's. Like Stacy in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, Connie is left to her own devices and becomes responsible for her own well-being. Connie's and Stacy's stories are, as Shary puts it, narratives of the "survival of adolescence."<sup>19</sup> They represent girls dealing with the consequences of sexual desire and activity, rather than passively accepting victimhood. As Nancy Naples argues, "In fact, the term *survivor* is typically reserved for those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of 'victim'."<sup>20</sup> These depictions constitute steps toward less romanticized representations of girls' sexual initiation and promote a discourse of survival and growth, over victimhood, in teen cinema.

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<sup>19</sup> Shary 2002a, 1

<sup>20</sup> Naples, 1151.

## Chapter 3

### **Girl Power: Contextualizing *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997) & *Coming Soon* (2000)**

#### **Representing Girls in the 1990s**

Heightened panic surrounding the AIDS epidemic resulted in significantly fewer depictions of teen sexuality in popular films between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. Rather than incorporate the reality of HIV/AIDS into teen narratives during this period, Hollywood favored what Timothy Shary refers to as “romantic presexual relationships among teens” and the continued avoidance of depictions of teen sexuality.<sup>1</sup> He cites *Can't Buy Me Love* (1987) and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987) as examples, along with popular period films such as *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *A Night in the Life of Jimmy Reardon* (1988), *Man in the Moon* (1991), *Calendar Girl* (1993), and *Circle of Friends* (1995). “Even though teenage characters in some youth films continued to have sex, the narrative emphasis on sexual conquest was not prominent in these films like it had been in the early to mid-‘80s.”<sup>2</sup> Shary mentions *Mermaids* (1990) and *Return to the Blue Lagoon* (1991) as examples in which curious teens “moved within the more sensually subtle confines of PG-13 ratings.”<sup>3</sup> Films of the mid- to late 1990s would eventually take a more intense view of teen sexuality than their predecessors had, offering more straightforward depictions of gay and lesbian teens as well as perspectives of working-class adolescents’ and girls’ experiences.<sup>4</sup> The focus on girls’ empowerment and the growing teen

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<sup>1</sup> Shary 2002, 211.

<sup>2</sup> Shary 2002, 233.

<sup>3</sup> Shary 2002, 233.

<sup>4</sup> A few examples include *The Basketball Diaries* (1995), *Girls Town* (1996), and *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998).

population brought about many independent films for and about girls' sexualities, particularly via Riot Grrrl feminism and the resurgence of girl-centered consumer discourse. *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997), made by Sarah Jacobson, and *Coming Soon* (2000), directed by Colette Burson, exemplify the not uncomplicated progress made in girls' representation in American cinema in the mid- to late 1990s, as well as the continued marginalization of women working in the film industry. This chapter explores the social climate of the 1990s in order to contextualize these two films.

1992 saw the largest surge in teen population in the U.S. since 1975, resulting in greater attention to the teen (and pre-teen) consumer markets in the years following. Feminism had become popularized via the anti-pornography debates and the Anita Hill hearings so that the emergence of Riot Grrrl counterculture in the early 1990s—and its swift co-optation in the mainstream as “girl power” material culture—continued to alter popular conceptions of adolescent female sexuality and autonomy. In an interview with Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, one riot grrrl explains,

[c]reating your own culture is a feminist act. If you're a woman and you're creating your own culture, hopefully, your culture is saying that you have a place that's free of anything set up before you—being strong, safe, not hurt, being so many different things.... It's an empowering thing to create your own culture that has positive messages about you.<sup>5</sup>

Riot Grrrl communities emphasized a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude, encouraging girls to be culturally and politically active by making their own media.

Although operating on the margins of society, Riot Grrrls' pro-girl ethos and reshaping of girlhood as a powerful position of social, political, and cultural agency have helped shift public attention toward female youth. Moreover, this community's girl-only meetings and activities have provided many female adolescents with a supportive environment where they can bond with other like-

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<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg & Garofalo, 824.



minded girls and come to terms with the difficult experiences of teenage girlhood, such as homophobia, sexual abuse, and body-image problems.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most visible filmmaker to be influenced by Riot Grrrl was Sadie Benning, a teen girl with an inexpensive camera whose experimental autobiographical documentary work became quite well known in art and filmmaking communities of the early 1990s. Christie Milliken argues that “Benning’s self-(re)presentation or identity performances have developed their popular and critical recognition for the ways in which her work coincides with...the recent upsurge in the public visibility of and critical attention to ‘girl cultures’.”<sup>7</sup> As commercial media outlets caught onto the themes of female empowerment and feminist community manifest in Riot Grrrl activities, music, and zines, “girl power” became a buzz-term to appeal to girls of all ages.

The term is most often recognized as a slogan used by all-female British singing group, The Spice Girls, in their multimedia marketing campaigns to reach young female audiences. Their success propelled other “girl power” efforts such as Nike’s “Play Like a Girl” advertising campaign, t-shirts reading “Girls Rule!,” increased media attention on female athletes, and popular television programs about “self-confident, assertive, and intelligent girls such as Nickelodeon’s 1991 hit, *Clarissa Explains It All*.”<sup>8</sup> The ideals of Riot Grrrl counterculture were transformed into marketing strategies by commercial media through a superficial appropriation of language. Such co-optation of feminist ideas for commercial gain further marginalized those girls who continued to take cultural production and social critique upon themselves. These girls took responsibility for their own representations in order to generate beneficial discussion about issues impacting girls—issues with which mainstream society remains uncomfortable.

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<sup>6</sup> Kearney 1, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Milliken, 286.

<sup>8</sup> Banet-Weiser, 120.

Concerns over girls' well-being swelled after the 1991 publication of a report by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW), *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. The report findings became widely available in paperback in 1995. Peggy Orenstein called the study "a wake-up call to parents, teachers, and policymakers."<sup>9</sup> The original report and its subsequent publication precipitated several other popular studies tackling issues of female youth.<sup>10</sup> The mid-1990s was a time for girls to be seen as well as heard—or at least heard about—as scholars, authors, parents and educators expounded upon the state of girlhood.

During this time of concentrated focus on girls, *Clueless* (1995) was a huge hit, setting the stage for the multitude of girls' films that would be produced over the next few years. *Clueless* is Amy Heckerling's film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, updated with a wealthy, shopaholic teen protagonist from Los Angeles. Orenstein considers *Clueless* the beginning of a trend in positive films about girls' experiences. Heckerling says of her heroine, "Here's a girl, she's rich, she's manipulating people and thinks she knows what's going on but is so into her own world, she doesn't see what everybody else can see."<sup>11</sup> The compulsive materialism and romanticism of this film fit perfectly within the greater girl-power craze of the mid-1990s but did not go uncountered.

Independent films like *Kids* and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, also released in 1995, focused more directly on teen sexuality—the first through disturbingly gritty depictions of teen sex, rape, drug and alcohol use, and the lurking presence of HIV/AIDS; the second through an exploration of friendship and lesbianism

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<sup>9</sup> Orenstein, back cover of AAUW Report (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), Orenstein's *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem and the Confidence Gap* (1995), and Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997) are notable examples.

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, 53.

across racial and class boundaries. In the year that followed, several independent films about female adolescence were released to varying degrees of popularity and profit. Orenstein declared 1996 “the year of the teenage girl,” pointing to the slew of films released that year “in which girls [were] in charge of their own fates, active instead of reactive.”<sup>12</sup> She refers to *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* as one of the few empowering films of the time about girls’ coming-of-age but suggests that as an independent production it could not have heralded the trend that followed in the wake of *Clueless*. Films like *Girls Town*, *Foxfire*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and *Manny and Lo*, all released in 1996, find as their focus girls’ active agency, strength, and desire. The increasing popularity and accessibility of independent cinema helped make more girls’ films possible.

Independent female directors Maria Maggenti, Annette Haywood-Carter, and Lisa Krueger found success in their depictions of adolescent girls’ subjectivity and sexuality in the mid-1990s. When interviewed about her film (*The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*), Maggenti expressed its relevance to contemporary American society.

I think it's incredibly important and ironic, actually, that this movie would be released in the same summer that Phil Gramm, Bob Dole, Jesse Helms and Rush Limbaugh are all talking about morality and the family and their fears, I guess, about the changes that have transpired over the last twenty to twenty-five years. It's relevant because I'm presenting a portrait of American society that—although I know it makes some people uncomfortable—is accurate.<sup>13</sup>

Fears about dwindling morality and the disintegration of conservative family values and the institution of heterosexual marriage raged on as more and more diverse representations of marginalized and underrepresented people continued to enter the public sphere during the late 1990s. President Clinton’s administration struggled to

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<sup>12</sup> Orenstein 1996, H1.

<sup>13</sup> West & West, 41.

accommodate the contradictory politics of movement toward the acceptance of gays in the military versus the desire to preserve conservative family values and to protect children.<sup>14</sup>

This protectionist stance toward children garnered more support as younger and younger kids took up the activities and accoutrements of teen culture. At the same time, major corporations increasingly viewed teens (and children) as markets to be exploited for profit. Published in 1995, Peter Zollo's *Wise Up to Teens: Insights into Marketing and Advertising to Teenagers* energized teen marketing efforts and offered statistics based on teens' own opinions about their media use as well as recommendations on how and where teens could best be reached by advertisers. More and more pre-teens were the audience for teen narratives and products during this period and were quickly becoming Web-savvy as new, interactive technologies began to infiltrate schools and homes. The Internet was increasingly known as an easily accessible arena for the unregulated transmission of pornographic images, making it a threat to the safety of America's pure, still a-sexualized children and curious youth. The movement against child sexual abuse throughout the 1980s led to new legislation and greater emphasis on child safety by local police forces nationwide. More arrests and convictions within a period of several years only intensified public panic over the apparent increase in sexual and violent crimes against minors so that "the year 1995 was characterized by the furor over sex predator statutes and the fear of cyberstalkers."<sup>15</sup> Such moral panic over the sexualization of children and the threat of adult sexuality to childhood innocence relies in large part on contemporary discursive constructions of the child and of sexuality.

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<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, 232.

Public discourse surrounding sexuality in the 1990s relied on the construction of the child as innocent of sex and lacking sexual desire—an easy receptacle for adults’ anxieties and a defenseless victim to society’s ills. Women, as a discursive construction, suffered a quite similar categorization in 1990s’ American society. The child and the young woman were feminized via victimhood, dependence, and lack of subjectivity. The need was great for popular representations of girls’ sexual subjectivity, but the institutions that had hindered women working within the film industry and that controlled girls’ representations had not budged. Instead, women filmmakers interested in portraying girls’ sexuality more realistically worked independently of Hollywood during this period. Sarah Jacobson was one female filmmaker determined to bring her vision of female adolescence to the screen, without adhering to the double standard of patriarchal America and the watchdog, the MPAA ratings board.

**Sarah Jacobson & *Mary Jane’s Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997)**

Sarah Jacobson is said to have coined the term “Indiewood,” in reference to the commercialization of the independent film industry. Riot Grrrl punk feminism influenced her, as did the do-it-yourself and independent film communities throughout the 1990s, before her untimely death in 2004. Those in her loyal cult following view Jacobson as a DIY success, but copies of her films are extremely hard to find today, which attests to the difficulties faced by filmmakers trying to work and have their films seen apart from Hollywood studio conglomerates. Jacobson studied film at Bard College in New York, where she constantly struggled against male faculty and students to gain access to equipment and courses. Women in both undergraduate and graduate film production programs across the country continue to struggle against—mostly male—faculty and students who work to keep them out of leadership roles and deny them access to technologies and information. Upon graduating from Bard, Jacobson enrolled at the San

Francisco Art Institute where she found the same rigid atmosphere, but had better access to equipment and to more female faculty and students. She would ultimately find a supportive mentor in professor George Kuchar, who helped her exhibit her first short film. Her success came when she released *I Was a Teenage Serial Killer* in 1993. “It played all over the world. *Sassy* wrote it up. *Film Threat*, *Grand Royal*, a bunch of magazines like that. It really became kind of a cult hit.”<sup>16</sup> She spent the next three years writing, directing, shooting, and editing her first feature, *Mary Jane’s Not a Virgin Anymore*. With the help of her mother, she formed her own production company, Station Wagon Productions, to produce and distribute her work. Jacobson worked “totally punk-rock style,” as she put it, by constantly promoting her films through her own channels and considered herself “a feminist filmmaker, definitely.”<sup>17</sup> Due to *Mary Jane’s* frank discussions and depictions of sex from a female perspective, as well as her own politics, Jacobson did not submit the film to the MPAA for rating and therefore did not have her film distributed to major commercial theatres or widely released on video. “I didn’t take an existing system and work that system to make the film I wanted. I created a whole new system for myself and a whole new way of doing it where I could fit.... Me and my mom opened [*Mary Jane’s Not a Virgin Anymore*] in 23 cities theatrically.”<sup>18</sup>

*Mary Jane* had its world premiere at the Chicago Underground Film Festival in 1997, which many in the film world thought was a mistake assuming such exposure would relegate Jacobson’s work to the margins of the filmmaking community. But from that experience came a glowing review by well-known critic and Chicagoan, Roger Ebert, and from there the film earned enough recognition to be screened at the Sundance Film Festival. The film followed the independent film festival circuit, but notably was not

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<sup>16</sup> Savlov 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Savlov 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobson 2002.

selected for any of the women's film festivals to which it was submitted nor did it earn grants for which Jacobson applied through women's organizations. Jacobson saw her rejection by those organizations as part of a general lack of respect on the part of previous generations of women filmmakers who felt that younger women, such as Jacobson, "may not appreciate their past struggles."<sup>19</sup> Her audience was "punk rockers and people that like music—not any sort of mainstream feminist scene."<sup>20</sup> Though the film is certainly a feminist narrative of a teen girl's introduction to sex, its non-commercial production values and straightforward depictions of awkward sex from a girl's perspective made the film difficult for many to appreciate.

*Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* begins with an awkward sex scene in which Jane loses her virginity. Rather than following the trajectory of a teen boy's quest for loss of virginity as in most 1980s' films about teen sex, this film is about a girl's search for sexual understanding and satisfaction after losing her virginity. This is the sex quest from a girl's perspective. It isn't about exploitation or objectification. Her aim is to discover what she finds pleasing in her sexuality and in her relationships. Perhaps this move away from loss of virginity as the climax of the adolescent narrative is indicative of a shift in values from the early eighties to the late nineties. More likely, it is the infiltration of women into filmmaking—and the many factors which coincide in the socio-historical moment of production (not the least of which may be the aforementioned shift in values)—that allows for a girl's initiation into heterosexual sex to be represented as the (often anti-climactic) beginning, rather than the culmination, of the quest. A film about a girl's quest for pleasurable sexual experiences after initiation also can involve the depiction of the consequences she may face for being sexually active. While the girl

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<sup>19</sup> Jacobson 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobson 2002.

protagonists in *Fast Times* and *Smooth Talk* are, in very different ways, victimized for their sexual desires and activities, Jane (played by Lisa Gerstein) is portrayed as a healthy, responsible teen dealing with the emotional and physical stresses of unsatisfactory sex in a very straightforward manner. She remains open and confident about her right to be desirous and active in her pursuit of both romance and enjoyable physical relations. Jane is not forced to sacrifice her virginity; she practices safe sex so that she does not struggle with unwanted pregnancy, abortion, or sexually transmitted diseases.

While Jacobson's film is nearly impossible to find,<sup>21</sup> it is not the only film to begin its girl-centered narrative with loss of virginity. Colette Burson's film, *Coming Soon*—completed in 1999, but released in 2000 after much negotiation with the Hollywood ratings board—is another such tale of a girl's quest for sexual desire and fulfillment after an unpleasant initiation.

### **Colette Burson & *Coming Soon* (2000)**

Like Amy Heckerling, Burson studied film at New York University. Afterward she wrote and directed for regional theatre and took on several studio-assignment scripts. A producer at Savoy discovered her script for *Coming Soon*, and it became the first New York production for independent Bandeira Productions. It seems Jacobson predicted the response of Hollywood's censors to any attempt to represent girls as sexual subjects, thus avoiding commercial distribution of *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*. Still, Burson had hopes that her unapologetic, feminist look at girls' sexuality would find a major theatrical release and be seen by girls all over the country. While making the film, she

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<sup>21</sup> Jacobson's work has been donated to New York University, but her films are not available on loan from that collection. *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* is available from the library at Willamette University in Oregon. I borrowed that copy, but its poor audio quality makes it nearly unwatchable. Ultimately, I borrowed a better copy on VHS from an acquaintance.



struggled against her male producers who demanded a commercial teen movie. “[She] had to work within commercial constraints and a lot of those are dictated by gender ideas.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast to Jacobson’s decision not to work with producers, Burson made many compromises in order that her project be marketable in the eyes of her financiers.

*Coming Soon* interweaves three teen girls’ tales of self-discovery through sexual experimentation. Stream (played by Bonnie Root), Jenny (Gaby Hoffman), and Nell (Tricia Vessey) are best friends who live in Manhattan and attend an exclusive prep school, paid for by their wealthy, self-absorbed and often absent parents. Of the three storylines, Stream’s search for an orgasm is foregrounded. The focus of the narrative lies in her disappointment with her first heterosexual experiences of sex, which leave her unsatisfied and confused—especially after her boyfriend, whom she assumes knows better than she does, convinces her that she has climaxed when she has not. The narrative follows Stream on a journey through popular literature, therapy, and masturbation to discover what she’s been missing—an orgasm.

*Coming Soon* suffered considerable flak from the MPAA for its portrayals and discussions of female orgasms and girls’ sexual desire. While the film deals directly with girls’ struggles to find sexual fulfillment and agency, it employs little offensive language, graphic sex, or scatological humor and no nudity—none of the attributes that usually qualify a film for the MPAA’s “R” or more damning “NC-17” ratings. According to Ron Leone and Lynn Osborn, “the MPAA uses the PG-13 rating as a way of getting more adult content—most often sex and violence—into an unrestricted film accessible by children of any age.”<sup>23</sup> It would stand to reason that a film like *Coming Soon*, with its

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<sup>22</sup> Lehmann-Haupt (1999).

<sup>23</sup> Leone & Osborn, 86.

focus on youth and minimal elements of sex and no violence, would earn such a rating. However, the MPAA determined that its content should be restricted.

Critics cried out over the injustice suffered by Burson, *Coming Soon*, and potential audiences. In an article for the *Village Voice*, Amy Taubin writes, “Because of its antiquated notions of gender and sexuality, the MPAA is preventing a major area of female experience from being represented on the screen.”<sup>24</sup> In stark comparison to *Coming Soon*, *American Pie* (1999) was released to theatres all over the country just one year prior to *Coming Soon*’s single theatrical engagement in New York City. *American Pie* adds to a long line of adolescent male sex-quest comedies and capitalizes on graphic sex acts, nudity, humor based on all manner of male bodily emissions, and plenty of sexual dialogue. While graphic films about men’s and boys’ desires, including this one, garner “R” ratings with minimal squabbling from the MPAA and perform quite well at the box office, Burson’s attempt at cleanly—presumably even by MPAA standards—depicting girls’ sexual desires forced her to fight fiercely for the “PG-13” rating she had expected to receive, only to have the film (twice) earn the dreaded “NC-17” and finally be rated “R.” The discrepancies—as determined by the MPAA—between *American Pie* and *Coming Soon* are indicative of a glaring double standard in American society, reflected here in a sexed difference in sexual representation. Discussing her experiences with the MPAA, Burson reveals that

[a]lmost any time a girl orgasmed, the board wanted me to cut the scene by 75 percent, even though she was 18. I was told specifically that the board has a problem with young girls' orgasms. I got on the phone with a woman from the board and said I can't help but point out that if it were boys, you wouldn't have a problem. She said that may well be true, however, it is the job of the board to judge for parents across America and if the parents were to see the movie they

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<sup>24</sup> Taubin (1999).

would be judging it with a double standard and therefore the board must judge it that way too.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the MPAA's adherence to this double standard, *Coming Soon* was submitted to multiple edits, which may have contributed to its failure to earn wide release and revenue. According to *Variety*, *Coming Soon* grossed only \$5,453 at the box office. While the film reportedly received rave reviews from fans at the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival and the Nantucket Film Festival, it was not picked up by a major distributor, which would have allowed it to reach a much wider audience.<sup>26</sup> Not only was Burson forced to alter the content of her film to qualify for a rating that would make it possible to be released to theatres, but the arduous process of re-submitting the film in edited forms, having it rejected repeatedly with an "NC-17" rating, and never earning the "PG-13" it initially seemed destined for all worked together to keep distribution companies at bay. In general, if a film does not seem like a guaranteed hit at the box office, it will have a tough time finding distribution. In this way, ratings struggles over what the MPAA and the parents it speaks for deem to be questionable sexual content involving teen girls certainly worked to keep Burson's film out of theatres. Even so, *Coming Soon* is now available on video and DVD.

Though located among wealthy social elite of Manhattan, *Coming Soon* offers a down-to-earth depiction of a girl's discovery of bodily pleasure. Not necessarily a solitary, silent struggle, a girl's attempt at understanding her sexuality can certainly be a mysterious and accidental one. Stream's parents are oblivious, so she approaches her girlfriends to find out what she's missing. But even her aggressive, streetwise, sexually

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<sup>25</sup> Lehmann-Haupt (1999).

<sup>26</sup> In contrast, *American Pie*'s successful and decidedly less problematic cinematic release earned it over \$200 million.

active friends lack the knowledge, experience, and vocabulary to help her along.<sup>27</sup> Stream, Jenny, and Nell easily represent many, many teen girls caught in a cycle of silence and anxiety about their own sexual desires. In the following chapter, I analyze *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* and *Coming Soon* with particular attention to how they construct and represent female adolescent sexual subjectivity—ideologically and via narrative.

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, the lack of candor is indicative of the MPAA's discomfort at hearing girls talk about orgasms. And the MPAA speaks for that demographic perhaps most anguished by the film's theme: men with teenage daughters.

## Chapter 4

### **Pleasure Quest: Girls' Sexual Autonomy in *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997) & *Coming Soon* (2000)**

The near absence of girls as desiring subjects in American visual culture reinforces girls' internalization of society's silence surrounding female sexual desire. Karen Martin theorizes sexuality as deeply connected to a sense of self—the discovery of which is generally accepted as the primary task of adolescence. For her, “sexual subjectivity (the ability to feel confident in and in control of one's body and sexuality) shapes one's ability to be agentic (the ability to act, accomplish, and feel efficacious in other parts of one's life) and vice versa.”<sup>1</sup> American girls and boys alike are faced with an overwhelming daily barrage of sexual imagery and discourse that positions girls and women as objects, rather than subjects, of desire. Girls' sexuality becomes just another part of their experience unworthy of frank public discussion and is almost always represented in terms of male desire. “In a society that covets teenage female bodies so overtly, the sexual development of females is particularly challenged by the confusion between being the object of, versus the subject of, sexual desire.”<sup>2</sup> Caitlin E. Welles offers this call to action:

It is necessary to redress [the] “missing discourse of desire”.... [W]e must understand more fully the particular meaning and function sexual desire has for girls in our society.... Relevant research could include examining...the impact of the mixed messages girls are receiving from the popular culture....<sup>3</sup>

In taking up Welles's call for further examination of cultural texts, I analyze two films—Sarah Jacobson's *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* (1997) and Colette Burson's

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Welles, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Welles, 43

*Coming Soon* (2000)—that work to create dialogue about adolescent female desire by foregrounding girls’ discovery of sexual pleasure from female perspectives and by depicting girls learning to feel good about their sexualities. I chose to study these films because they are lesser-known examples of late nineties’ independent girls’ films made by young women that offer fairly stable messages about girls’ sexuality. Each in its way promotes a positive, straightforward view of girls’ sexual exploration in adolescence, complicated only by society’s constructions of proper femininity, which deny female sexual subjectivity.

***Mary Jane’s Not a Virgin Anymore (1997)***

Jane (played by Lisa Gerstein) is a seventeen-year-old high school senior. She works at a cultish art-house movie theatre and hangs out with her punk co-workers to escape the boredom of her suburban home. After a dissatisfying sexual initiation, she embarks on a quest to know her body and better understand sexuality. The quest begins when the first titles of the film appear. Typed in an off-kilter pink font, they introduce the production company and filmmaker, then the title of the film, with the word “VIRGIN” emphasized and stamped in pink stencil on a black background, filmed with a jerky, handheld camera—reminiscent of individually printed punk zines. The first scene that follows is a dramatization of a B-movie love scene with two anonymous actors who do not reappear in the film. Overlaying the image of the young couple in bed, the credits introducing the cast and crew follow the stamped titles and are scrawled in perfect, pink, flowery script. These contrasting titles create a dichotomous atmosphere for the film’s polarized dialogue between girls’ actual sexual experiences and cinematic representations of their experiences. In the film clip, a young woman in a garish blonde wig and negligee confesses to her boyfriend, Steve, that she is a virgin. Steve caresses her face as they kiss, half-covered by the bedspread. He reassures her, “It’s O.K. I love you. Let me show

you...” The saxophone sounds lilting in the background are at once suggestive of soft-core pornography and romantic Hollywood melodrama. Just as the scene heats up and the young woman begins to sigh in ecstasy, Jane cries out in pain. The scene cuts to reveal the real Steve (played by Shane Kramer) and Jane, naked on a blanket in the cemetery. Shot from above, Steve’s white backside bounces in the moonlight as he unceremoniously deflowers Jane. She tells him it is uncomfortable and he tells her to “relax and it wouldn’t be so bad.” Her face and her words betray her pain and discomfort until finally Steve asks if she wants him to stop. “Yes. Just stop. Get off me now!” Jane’s resolve is firm, and Steve is frustrated. Losing her virginity is not what Jane imagined it might be—not like in the movies.

Jane works at a movie theatre that features cult or art films that verge on the pornographic. The diegetic soundtrack during the many scenes in the theatre lobby consists of women’s moans and heavy breathing, a constant reminder of sex—the persistence and ubiquity of mediated sexuality. The sounds of a woman in the throes of passionate sex also serve as an intertextual reference to the sexualization, fetishization, and objectification of female bodies in popular culture, specifically in cinema. Because the films shown in the theatre, where Jane works, are only visible in the love scenes used to contrast with Jane’s experiences, the soundtrack plays a significant role in how audiences interpret the films screened there. Those scenes depict only heterosexual couples engaged in foreplay, leading perhaps to the assumption that the disembodied female voices on the soundtrack during other moments are not the sounds of women fulfilling their own sexual desires but are the result of heterosexual intercourse. The soundtrack is then aligned with heterosexist and patriarchal portrayals of female sexuality. And, though the film does not allow for the possibility of lesbian sexuality among its primary characters, the diegetic sound works in contrast to the visual

depictions of Jane's subjectivity (rather than objectification) during her sexual experiences, which do include auto-erotic pleasure. While the moviegoers and theatre employees seem oblivious or desensitized to them, the sexual noises in the not-so-distant background add to the intensity of interactions in the lobby. Customers complain and make demands, badgering the staff, while the employees harass each other, wrestle each other, and argue with the patrons—all underscored by a rhythmic, crescendo of feminine moans from inside the theatre. Female sexuality thus haunts the characters and overwhelms the narrative from the inside, outward.

While masculinization seems to be the trend in many independent films about girls of the late 1990s, Jacobson's characterization of a strong, active heroine does not rely on masculinization, just as it does not limit its heroine to meaningful friendships with women. Mary Celeste Kearney argues that several late nineties' independent girls' films made by women, such as *All Over Me* (1997), *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), and *Foxfire* (1996), "subvert the traditional feminine mise-en-scène of female teenpics through a simultaneous masculinization of their female protagonists."<sup>4</sup> Specifically, she discusses the masculine clothing and activities associated with these heroines. She also points to an emphasis on supportive female friendships in such films. In contrast to those portrayals, Jane wears skirts with her sneakers, works among men and women in the service industry, and generally refrains from the heavy drinking and partying of her cohorts. While Jane is not particularly feminine, she is not masculinized to the point of alienation—she relates to her female friends just as easily as she does her male friends. When she returns from her disastrous date with Steve, Jane first confides in Dave (played by Greg Cuijkshank), the theatre manager. He is clearly her closest friend,

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<sup>4</sup> Kearney 2002 139.



perhaps in part because he is homosexual and relatable as an ally—a fellow outsider. Jane shares intimate conversations with her co-workers, both male and female—Ericka (Beth Allen), Ryan (Bwana Spoons), Tom (Chris Enright), and Grace (Marny Snyder Spoons). She considers them her true friends, as opposed to “the losers” at school who “always used to throw things at [her].”

It could be argued that Jane’s involvement in the local punk rock scene is a form of masculinization. Punk counterculture is primarily devoted to the elevation of male punk bands and a rebellious attitude that ultimately reinforces patriarchal ideals of competitive autonomy and self-sufficiency—ideals that can exclude females who want to value relationships and who welcome cooperative interactions over competition. That said, what is in evidence in *Mary Jane*’s presentation of the punk scene is that women have forged spaces for themselves and maintain a community and culture of their own that is not ancillary to masculinist punk culture but is interwoven with it and, in moments, runs parallel. According to Kearney, “punk has had a considerable impact on contemporary feminist ideologies, especially for teenage girls and young women raised during the 1980s and 1990s when this youth culture was broadly diffused beyond its original urban locales.”<sup>5</sup> Jane is one such teenage girl, engaged in a punk community made up by her friends from the theatre and their riot grrrl bands and other friends.

Jane’s confidant, Ericka, is the singer in a female punk band, just returned from touring the country. Early in the film, Ericka introduces Jane to one of her male groupies. Ericka has been drunkenly making out with him at a party, but forgets his name. When he leaves to fetch her another beer she reveals to Jane, “I’m so glad he’s hitching a ride with Babes in Toyland in a couple of days!” Clearly, this portrayal of punk life from a powerful female perspective is a manifestation of the Riot Grrrl movement of the early

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<sup>5</sup> Kearney 2006, 156.

nineties in which girls formed punk bands and circulated their homemade zines, albums, and videos at girl-centered concerts, creating a supportive community to nurture girls' cultural production and feminist awareness, often to the exclusion of boys and men by whom many had been treated like second-class citizens and sex objects.

Like many other girls who identify with Riot Grrrl, Jane and Ericka are both active creators of feminist culture—a culture that gives them autonomy and the power to speak their minds. Ericka performs in a punk rock band, and Jane brings her video camera to work to film mock interviews with her co-workers about how they like living in a (fictional) country where women have equal rights. At one point, her always drunk and irritating co-worker, Matt, takes the camera and films her body in crooked close-up while she talks about how great her country is. Though they may struggle against the harsh words and oppressive behaviors of male coworkers and peers, these girls support each other's cultural production and find validation in feminist community.

Jane is nobody's fool. She knows how to ask for what she wants. The trouble is that she is not sure what she is missing. Her relationship with Ericka plays a significant role in her sexual awakening. Ericka speaks frankly about masturbation, sex, and the clitoris about which Jane reveals she learned next to nothing in sex education class—not to mention from her parents whose only appearance in the film is via an overheard argument about leaving Jane alone too much.

The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public schooling on sexuality.... A genuine discourse of desire would invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would...pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fine & Weis, 79.

If girls are to be empowered as sexual subjects, to manage their sexual desires, then they must be positioned as such within public discourse through comprehensive sex education and active self-representation as well as through popular media representation. As a senior in high school, preparing to go away for college, Jane knows less than she should about her body. Jane's parents are absent from her life. As many parents in the 1990s, they appear too busy to worry about their daughter's coming of age. Her aptitude in school convinces her parents that she is a success, allowing them to ignore any trickiness surrounding her emotional and sexual development. Jane is fortunate enough to have a group of supportive friends, one of whom acts as a sort of mentor as she develops her desires and her voice. Ericka tells Jane to explore her body in order to discover what can be pleasurable about sex.

Though Ericka's guidance is a powerful catalyst, Jane's sexual experiences, both alone and with boys, help her to determine her tastes and gain confidence in her body and her desires. Perhaps the film's most cinematic moments occur when Jane masturbates—an extremely rare occurrence in teen films. Two scenes are composed of high-angle close-ups, first of Jane's groping hand, then of her face as she grins blissfully and closes her eyes. Unlike during her initial sexual experience with Steve, now she is transported beyond the physical space of her body and surroundings. She glows, her face washed in bright white light, out of focus; her hair flows in vibrant curls around her; the world outside drops away as she brings herself to climax. Unlike during the scenes of Jane's heterosexual activity, here she experiences everything wonderful that she did not feel with Steve. No movie-scene frames the action—no enactment of sexual awakening with overly dramatic dialogue and music. On the contrary, these experiences are framed by the realities of Jane's daily life—dealing with her parents, befriending a co-worker. Jane's discovery of sexual desire and pleasure via masturbation is grounded in her

physical life—a normalized view of female masturbation that is rarely represented in U.S. cinema.

Jane's discovery of how to give herself an orgasm empowers her to tell Tom, her coworker, friend, and new crush, what she likes when they decide to become sexually intimate after a date. It also shows her the level of consideration with which she wants to be treated in sexual situations. Where Steve barely considered her feelings at all, Tom expresses that he wants to know Jane's preferences, and he wants to share his. While Tom's car may seem little more romantic than Steve's blanket in the cemetery, the experience is quite a bit different. Jane and Tom seek mutual pleasure—each hoping to please the other—and are able to voice their desires. Tom respects Jane's desire for them to explore their bodies without having sex. This frank depiction of a couple casually discussing sex and acting on their desires in a mutually pleasurable exchange—incorporating a young female perspective—is atypical of popular cinema because it does not connote romance in the conventional manner and gives the girl agency. While many, many films depict women submitting to men's desires, their bodies dissected and idealized by the camera, *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* allows Jane to speak and enact her desires—not for someone else's consumption but for her own satisfaction and empowerment. According to Anita Harris's study of late 1990s' parenting manuals and guidebooks for teen girls, "responsibility for simultaneous containment and expression of polite but unequivocal heterosexuality is central to successful female adolescence."<sup>7</sup> Jacobson's film advocates the free expression of sexuality, to the extent that it is contained to private moments alone or between a mutually supportive heterosexual couple, but it distinctly avoids championing self-

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<sup>7</sup> Harris 1999, 120.

containment as necessary to female adolescence. On the contrary, Jane freely discusses sex and expresses her desires with and without the encouragement of others.

Generally, a girl like Jane—intelligent, bold, and active—would be portrayed in a commercial teen film as inappropriately masculine (via *mise-en-scène*, for instance), insane (to be feared and ultimately punished), and/or socially unacceptable (most often, in need of a make-over). In his discussion of smart girls in 1990s' American films, Timothy Shary states “many films appear to be offering empowering messages for girls when ultimately they still minimize the power of knowledge and emphasize the power of beauty.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than suggest that braininess needs a disguise, or that Jane can't be sexy and intelligent and retain her personality intact, *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* focuses on Jane's ability to do and be all that she is—and be accepted by friends like Ericka and be attractive to young men like Tom. Certainly, Jane catches flak from her co-workers and her peers at school for being smart, but she does not change herself to earn approval. Instead, she changes her environment and renegotiates her loyalties. She takes the job at the theatre to be around the people she likes and to escape the stifling suburbs. Ultimately, Jane is rewarded for being true to herself.

As a reference to the many films in which young women have suffered injury, abandonment, and even death in order to contain their sexual desires, Jane is indirectly punished when she loses her friend and co-worker and potential boyfriend, Tom. Jane hears from a friend that Tom has been killed in a car accident several weeks after their tryst in the car. Though saddened at the loss—and perhaps motivated by the fact that Tom is gone—Jane pursues her personal dream of escaping to college in a distant city. This turn of events allows Jane to be understood as a survivor. She will make it safely out of

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<sup>8</sup> Shary 2002b, 237.

the suburbs, out of high school, out of life at the theatre, and out of adolescence without compromising her desires.

The final scenes of the film, indicated by the intertitle, “The Following Year,” begin with three couples standing on the church steps, ready to be married. The thoughts of each of the brides are audible in voice-over narration as the camera focuses on their faces. Each young woman describes her relationship with her groom, as if she were addressing him directly. One of the brides reminisces, “Remember how we used to fight like cats and dogs? I’m so glad we figured out that underneath it all we’re really in love with each other and now we’re getting married!” As heart-felt as the delivery, these brides’ reasons for being excited about marrying their grooms sound more like rationalizations than happy-ending affirmations. This sequence is similar to the B-movie love scenes earlier in the film and serves as a nod to the complicated tensions underlying the romantic, oversimplified happy endings of commercial films in which brides’ voices are frequently silenced or used to reiterate the middle-class ideals of heterosexual marriage and femininity. The brides’ sequence helps to emphasize Jane’s refusal—or inability—to submit to an oppressive or otherwise misguided romantic relationship, whose culmination in a traditional wedding might otherwise symbolically mark the end of her story. These scenes position Jane, and her female friends, outside the realm of many conventional narratives by juxtaposing their independent pursuits against the disingenuous bride’s pursuit of a wedding. Instead of romance or monogamy, Jane focuses on her schoolwork, friendships, and zine production. (Grace is a single mother, having given birth to Tom’s son after he died. Ericka is in a lesbian relationship with Tom’s sister.) Jane’s happy ending does not involve a wedding—is not reliant on the presence of a man. Jane continues to define herself not necessarily in relation to men but by her activities and self-representation through creative expression.

### ***Coming Soon (2000)***

Jenny (played by Gaby Hoffman), Nell (Tricia Vessey), and Stream (Bonnie Root) are best friends who attend an exclusive prep school in Manhattan. As the title suggests, Stream's search for an orgasm takes precedence over the storylines of the other two girls. The film begins at a party in a luxurious high-rise loft apartment in New York City. Stream is having sex for the first time in one of the bedrooms. A high-angle shot reveals her discomfort and disinterest as Chad (played by James Roday) furiously climaxes and rolls off of her. They are both clothed, and Stream looks only slightly disheveled and bewildered when the deed is completed. Jenny and Nell enjoy post-coital cigarettes on her behalf in the other room. When they question her, Stream admits, "It hurt a little bit...but I loved it!" Jenny welcomes her into womanhood with a swig of champagne. Clearly, Stream is saying what she knows her more experienced friends expect to hear, and for their part, Jenny and Nell encourage her positive attitude toward sex—specifically loss of virginity—as a step into the realm of female adulthood.

After her second experience, this time with Chad in the school's equipment closet between classes, Stream tells her friends, "The whole sex thing is kind of a drag." Chad's moans, yelps, and breathing are heard as the camera pans over the baskets full of sports equipment (mostly a variety of balls). As his climax becomes audible, the camera reaches the couple in the corner. This time we do not have to see Stream's face to know she is not enjoying herself. She does not make a sound. In fact, she is barely visible except for her feet dangling motionless off the counter, obscured by Chad's legs and the sight of his dropped pants and underwear jerking back and forth. Chad does what he likes, disregarding the obvious fact that Stream remains unsatisfied. While Jenny and Nell advise Stream to keep trying until she likes it, Jenny's mother reveals, "Women don't enjoy sex...because they aren't climaxing." When Jenny inadvertently mentions the

constant stories about sex in a popular women's magazine, Stream, hearing of them for the first time, hurries home to start reading. She locates her mother's books (*Joy of Sex*, *The Hite Report*, and *Becoming Orgasmic*) and continues her research in a brief montage. When she reads her findings to Jenny and Nell, they agree that the descriptions of orgasmic sensations are accurate. But later in the film each girl admits to not having experienced satisfying sex and embarks on her own search for the sex she wants.

Stream tries to express to Chad that she wants the orgasm she has read about, but he interrupts her. "I love you," he says, as he pushes her head down into his lap and unzips his pants. Surprised by this sudden show of emotional attachment, Stream lets him position her and tell her what he wants. Even armed with the knowledge that something is more pleasurable about sex than what she has felt with Chad, Stream remains passive, feeling naïve and inexperienced compared to her peers. The last straw comes when Stream discovers that Chad has manipulated her into believing that she has had an orgasm when she has not. After taking the SAT, the couple goes out for dinner—ostensibly to celebrate Chad's assumed success while Stream thinks she performed poorly on the test. They take ecstasy during the meal so that they can "have fun later." They take the limo around the city, enjoying drug-induced euphoria. When they have sex on the floor of the car, the feel of the carpet against her skin is enough to distract Stream. When it is quickly over, Stream says she felt like she was about to climax. Chad convinces her that she did orgasm and that is what made him climax. "Why do you think I stopped? You came!" Stream is high and still unaware of what an orgasm might feel like so she trusts his judgment. It is not until she actually discovers her orgasm that Stream realizes that Chad cares little for her. At that point she is able to stand up for what she wants and express her desires.



Stream's nearly accidental orgasm in a Jacuzzi—her first fulfilling experience with masturbation—is pivotal to the film. It is the moment in which she realizes her potential for the physical pleasure she had only read about. Stream and Jenny share a daiquiri while enjoying a soak in Jenny's bubbly Jacuzzi tub. The girls wear bathing suits and chat over the sound of the jets. Following a line of questioning begun by her therapist, Jenny asks Stream if she has ever masturbated. When Stream says, "Not really," Jenny seems relieved: "I didn't think so, I mean it's so weird." In an earlier scene, Jenny explains to her therapist that, no, Stream does not masturbate. "She's not desperate. I mean she's got a boyfriend." Clearly, these girls, even in private, intimate conversation have little to say about the act and consider their sexuality in relation to heteronormative relationships and male desire. Michel Foucault theorizes, "It would be less than exact to say that the pedagogical institution has imposed a ponderous silence on the sex of children and adolescents.... [It] has coded contents and qualified speakers."<sup>9</sup> Like many girls then, Stream and Jenny are unfamiliar with masturbation and the female orgasm and are barely able to broach these topics. They adopt an air of superiority to compensate for their lack of understanding. Even when they attempt to discuss their sexual desires, the exclusion of female sexual subjectivity from their education—both formal and informal—works to keep them stymied and alienated in order that others may more easily speak on their behalf.

Stream's first orgasm is a revelation, but only for her and for those who are familiar with the concept. The sequence relies on a series of close-ups as pleasure writes itself across her face and a prolonged close-up of water rushing from the jets. Unfortunately, inexperienced girls watching this scene will learn only the performance of an orgasm—not the feeling or mechanics of the experience. Here, the physical practice of

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, 29.

masturbation is left a mystery, overshadowed by the depiction of the orgasm—an enigma of contorted facial expressions, rhythmic sensual music, and an extended burst of water which acts as both metaphoric phallic replacement and vaginal signifier. Water rushes powerfully out of the jets, rather than into a receptacle, visually signifying Stream's orgasm when her body—or the reactions of others—can't depict it. Jenny's presence immediately before and after this scene helps to legitimize the experience. Jenny can see the after-effects and react for the audience. Her absence during the climax reasserts these girls' heterosexuality and validates masturbation as perhaps a heteronormative potentiality for any girl. Had Jenny been in the Jacuzzi when Stream made her discovery, homosocial undertones might complicate this portrayal of girls' masturbation, allowing it to be written off as deviant. As conservative as this depiction may be, the existence of female masturbation in a film directed at girls continues to be groundbreaking for a culture so focused on controlling girls' bodies, afraid of their desires.

Though an outsider among her friends, Stream is allowed subjectivity and will not be marginalized or exploited. While Jenny plays sage to Stream's naïveté, Nell appears sophisticated and bitter against Stream's positive outlook and unassuming manner. Stream is blond and often wears floral patterns, bright colors, and diaphanous layers, the combination of which separate her from her dark-haired, often black-clad friends. Having recently moved to Manhattan from Vermont, Stream is of slightly lower socioeconomic status than Jenny and Nell, who demonstrate their wealth through a lack of worry about money, the absence of working parents, and lack of pressure regarding their spending or future earnings. Stream, in contrast, is under constant pressure from her working father—the only father to appear in the film—to pay for her college education with scholarships and to refrain from using his credit card. Class differentiation serves to distance Stream from her friends, allowing her space in which to pursue her desire for

intimacy with someone who cares about her and can accept her as a sexual subject rather than using her for his pleasure.

Stream is not the only one to discover her sexual desires in *Coming Soon*—Jenny learns that wild sex is not all there is to a relationship, and Nell struggles to reveal that she is lesbian. For all their similarities, Jenny and Nell have distinctly different experiences of sexual awakening in adolescence. Nell is the first of the three to prove that liking someone can improve the sexual experience. “Stream, you were right. ‘Like’ totally has something to do with it.” Nell feels compelled to talk with the drummer of a local band when she hears Jenny refer to her as a dyke. After the concert, Nell questions the drummer (played by Xenia Buravsky), “Are you really a lesbian?” They take a walk and talk into the early morning. When it is time to go home, Nell kisses her, succumbing to her desires. Though no other physical contact is depicted between the girls, Nell reveals the extent of their interactions the following day. Nell invites Jenny and Stream over to tell them that she is lesbian and that she has had an orgasm for the first time. Stream is happy for her friend and glad to know that she is on the right track toward understanding what she wants out of sex and out of her romantic relationships. When Stream experiences her first orgasm, she not only achieves a sense of self-actualization but shifts her focus from better sex to better sex in a relationship with someone she genuinely likes. Stream and Nell claim agency by going after their individual ideals for romance and sex rather than continuing passively to allow the cooptation of their bodies and choices for male pleasure.

In contrast, Jenny’s wild sexual escapades leave her boyfriend, Louis (played by Ashton Kutcher), feeling empty and alone in the relationship. Jenny puts on quite a show, complete with loud screams, animal-print lingerie and bedding, aggressive—almost violent—movements, and daring positions. Yet Louis feels unnoticed. Jenny may have

taken cues from *Cosmo*, but she has not made them her own. She does not actually enjoy the charade but believes this is what sex is all about—and that sex is the primary significance of intimate relationships. Louis ends their relationship, explaining, “We’re not connecting in bed. I mean, our sex life is empty.” Jenny admits to her friends, “To be honest, sex with Louis was kind of a drag.” She begins to see that she is not as happy with her sexual life as she would like to be. Ultimately, Jenny, who seemed so sophisticated and worldly early on, is slow to develop. She falls behind in school, does not apply herself to enter college, and is incapable of celebrating her friends’ triumphs. Instead, she remains competitive, spending more and more time on the treadmill to lose weight, persecuting those who are different from her with caustic wit, and flaunting her family’s wealth in order to feel superior. In her own ways she takes action to solve her problem. She exercises to feel better about her body; she composes personal ads to meet men. Unfortunately, Jenny is unable to discover what will make her happy within the course of the film, so she does not attain it, as Nell and Stream seem to. The narrative positions Jenny as a girl struggling to define herself by social conventions of femininity, thinness, and fashionable material consumption—conventions that her body does not conform to and that do not allow her to find satisfaction through sexual expression.

*Coming Soon* bucks dominant conventions by making girls subjects of their narratives, with agency and desires, and by giving them the ability to talk about their desires, their orgasms, and even to masturbate, as boys are free to do in so many other contemporary films. Catherine Driscoll states that “[s]ex (within sex education) is a naturalized field of learned structures for desire, behavior, and pleasure, but in the context of girls’ culture romance operates as the same kind of field, rather than as a directly imposed mechanism for social reproduction.”<sup>10</sup> While *Coming Soon* offers formerly rare

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<sup>10</sup> Driscoll, 156.

portrayals of girls as sexual subjects, it contradictorily employs romance to connect girls to each other and to temper their deliberate and aggressive quests for sexual fulfillment. The girls of *Coming Soon* learn from each other and have the potential to inform audiences on topics that are not discussed, but their sexual knowledge and desires are counterbalanced—appropriately feminized, according to dominant narrative conventions—by longing for heterosexual romance. When Stream’s therapist tells her that she is being passive, she and Jenny decide to compose personal ads to find dates for “mutual exploration.” But when Stream’s blind date does not result in an orgasm, she considers that she might enjoy sex more with someone she knows better. She is drawn to Henry (played by Ryan Reynolds), a boy from school, whose music video she catches on television only to realize that the ballad he is singing is about her. When Stream attends his concert, he sings another song in which he exclaims that he knows how to love a woman and again refers to his feelings for her. The straightforward and sensitive nature of his songs give her the confidence to ask him for a date, but without his romantic outpouring, it seems Stream might not have found the courage to act on her desire to know Henry.

While Stream and Nell seek romantic relationships, Jenny continues to pursue sex for the sake of sex and is repeatedly denied. She rejects the notion that emotional connection might play a role in sexual satisfaction, though most likely that rejection is part of her greater concern for feeling superior rather than vulnerable to others. Still, Jenny’s personal ad is answered, but the guy does not show up to meet her. She is further humiliated when she questions the wrong person after having waited all day for her date to arrive. Her final scene finds her sweating it out on the treadmill in her bedroom, trying to become skinny. She blames her body for not attracting male attention, but the film sends the message that sex without romance cannot be satisfying and will ultimately

leave a girl alone and bitter—self-absorbed and in constant competition with other girls. Quite often girls are positioned in relation to dominant culture and social institutions via their associations with romance, fashion, and beauty culture.<sup>11</sup> Romance becomes the key to happiness and good sex for Stream and Nell while fashion and beauty culture continue to wreak havoc on Jenny's psyche as she bases her self-worth on attractiveness and body image. Each of these daughters of wealthy Manhattanites is certainly portrayed as an avid consumer of fashion and beauty culture, but they are not necessarily passively reproducing dominant ideas about girlhood. Stream, Jenny, and Nell easily represent many, many teen girls caught in a cycle of silence and anxiety about their own sexual desires. But Stream and Nell both take action to learn about their sexuality and find ways to express their desires.

American boys and girls are socialized, in part, through popular moviegoing. Whether they identify with them or not, they are presented with distinct representations of teen girl sexualities. "One of the major reasons for the potential influence of movies in the area of sex is the absence of other sources of information."<sup>12</sup> If girls and boys are not enlightened about their potential for sexual subjectivity through comprehensive sex education programs in schools, then they are forced to look elsewhere to solve the mysteries that come to the fore in adolescence. What they are left with is the near constant objectification of women and girls in popular culture, which subordinates female desires and agentic potential to those of men and boys. By exploring representations of adolescent female sexual desire in *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* and *Coming Soon*,

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<sup>11</sup> Driscoll 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Considine, 205.

I hope to bring to light representations of girls claiming responsibility for their sexuality, feeling positively about their sexual desires, and acting on them in beneficial ways.

## Conclusion

Textual analyses, such as those within this project, are crucial to a clear understanding of how cultures represent themselves through popular media representation. It is particularly important for screen studies scholars to engage in discussion of how media content shapes and is shaped by social conventions and attitudes toward cultural taboos and marginalized peoples. Recent work by Sarah Hentges is devoted to girls' representation in popular independent and commercial films for and about girls in adolescence.

By looking at the independent films, it is easier to see what the mainstream includes and what it often leaves out, revealing a dearth of possibilities in the mainstream; the possibilities portrayed in independent films, by contrast, are many and varied.... Further, because all of the films discussed in this book are available in video stores, they are all accessible through mainstream media channels, which means that all of these films have to balance mainstream conventions to some extent.<sup>1</sup>

Her book, *Pictures of Girlhood*, takes a look at the significance of late-twentieth century coming-of-age narratives including films like *All Over Me* (1997) and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), which focus on the experiences of lesbian and queer teens, as well as *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992) and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), which offer portrayals of girls of color. She pointedly avoids incorporating into her arguments the images of girls in DIY and underdistributed films. While Hentges explores representations of marginalized girls, she fails to mention films like Sarah Jacobson's *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, which one might argue speak directly from the margins she refers to because they operate outside the constraints of Hollywood and apart from increasingly commercialized independent filmmaking. My

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<sup>1</sup> Hentges, 11.



determination to analyze a few of those DIY and underdistributed independent films that exhibit girls' sexual desires and experiences from powerful, positive teen female subjectivities adds depth and texture to the discussion of how girls are represented in U.S. cinema. My aim has been to move forward the scholarly conversations of girls' representation and girls' sexuality by incorporating films that not only explore sex and sexuality from adolescent girls' perspectives but that demonstrate the potential for women in filmmaking to positively alter representations of girls from the objectified to the subjective.

A woman filmmaker or director made each of the four films featured in this project. By virtue of being female and by virtue of her film's sexual, girl-centered content, each of these women endured difficulties not common to the production, distribution, and exhibition of films made by men or most commercial films which deny female subjectivity. Amy Heckerling, Joyce Chopra, Sarah Jacobson, and Colette Burson are just a few of the many women filmmakers and directors who have created inroads for feminist representations within Hollywood and independent cinema. Whether purposefully trying to fill a void in the public imagination or simply hoping to expand the diversity of female representation in popular films, these women have helped bring girls into view as whole, capable, inquisitive, and active within a culture that continues to dissect, degrade, and silence female bodies.

"Adolescent girls come of age in a patriarchal society in which they are under pressure to be seen and not heard."<sup>2</sup> The silence surrounding girls' sexual desire and subjectivity in American culture is at once perpetuated by and perpetuates the objectification of female bodies and rejection of those bodies as potent walking, talking sexual beings. Girls' sexuality becomes taboo when public discourse fails to recognize it

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<sup>2</sup> Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 131.

as legitimate in its own right—apart from patriarchal constructions of women and girls in terms of male desire. However, the films analyzed in the previous chapters—*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Smooth Talk*, *Mary Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore*, and *Coming Soon*—address the taboo, as publicly as they are allowed, by offering distinct portrayals of girls' quests to understand sex and successfully explore their sexual desires.

Changing conceptualizations of sexuality are manifest in cultural production—specifically through fluctuations in the representation of teen sex and desire in American cinema. According to Shary, “movies in the last 20 years of the [twentieth] century appeared almost fixated on capturing certain youth styles and promoting certain perspectives on the celebration (or really, survival) of adolescence.”<sup>3</sup> While the perspective most frequently promoted in commercial films is that of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male, feminist politics have infiltrated the film industry so that more and more women are making films and adding to the diversity of representation. In his study of gender in independent cinema, Michael Allen discusses the careers of several female directors, including Joyce Chopra, Allison Anders, Susan Seidelman, and Kathryn Bigelow. He argues that:

Significantly, the only one of the group to have maintained a film career is Kathryn Bigelow, largely by making the kind of male-oriented action films that have a greater chance of succeeding at the box office.... This fact brings into focus a particularity about many of the films just cited: namely, that, with the exception of Bigelow's films, they tend to display a preference for character over narrative. This indicates, perhaps, a certain female filmmaking sensibility, which is more interested in exploring emotion and states of mind than in describing events.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Shary 2002a, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Here Allen refers to *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), directed by Allison Anders, *Smithereens* (1982) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), directed by Susan Seidelman, and *Smooth Talk* (1985) and *The Lemon Sisters* (1990), directed by Joyce Chopra. Allen, 151.

The films analyzed in this project privilege—albeit to varying degrees—character development over plot development. They are just a few examples of how the late-twentieth century fascination with teen cultures, sexuality, and adolescence has—and can continue to be—expanded to incorporate representations of the lived experiences and perspectives of teen girls. These films work in a variety of ways to express “a sensibility which has long been forced into silence by [the film industry].”<sup>5</sup> In addition, they foreground issues of female adolescent sexuality that remain taboo in public discourse, while giving voice and representation to some of the teen girls who have been systematically denied subjective power in commercial cinema.

According to Annette Kuhn, “Dominant institutions of film production, distribution and exhibition cannot, for the most part, accommodate alternative or oppositional textual practices: the local Odeon is not the place to look for countercinema.”<sup>6</sup> Only one of the four films I chose to feature in this discussion (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*) ever made it to Kuhn’s “local Odeon,” and it falls into the popular high school comedy genre. Not an obvious example of feminist countercinema, its representation of female subjectivity is fleeting amidst an overwhelmingly masculine ensemble of characters. The other three films concentrate all their narrative energies in agentic female heroines. If *Smooth Talk*, *Mary Jane’s Not a Virgin Anymore*, and *Coming Soon* had been considered commercially viable (i.e., widely exhibited), their subversion of the dominant practices of representing girls might be considered anomalous to Kuhn’s argument. At the very least, they may be seen as sparks to signal recognition of the inequities inherent in contemporary discursive constructions of sexuality. But *Mary*

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<sup>5</sup> Allen, 151.

<sup>6</sup> Kuhn, 172.

*Jane's Not a Virgin Anymore* is nearly impossible to access. After searching the media collections of university libraries and my local independent video rental stores, I located a single copy for loan from Willamette University in Oregon. Unfortunately, that copy is in terrible condition—difficult to view and unintelligible in several places. I was later put in touch with Andrea Richards, author of *Girl Director*, who loaned me her personal copy. *Smooth Talk* and *Coming Soon* are both difficult to track down for rental or purchase, neither having been screened in more than one or two locations upon release; but I found both via the Internet. These facts alone support Kuhn's point that those films attempting to subvert the dominant ideology do not fair well in an industry ruled by speculation about box office and distribution revenues.

The struggle to infuse commercial cinema with a diversity of agentic girls and a vision of healthy female sexual subjectivity continues. While the films in my project represent girlhood as a primarily white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual experience, the general denial of female subjectivity in U.S. popular culture marginalizes all American girls. The films' themes of self-discovery and sexual exploration remain relevant to the adolescent experience today, but their materialistic, white, middle- to upper-class characters can do little to address the perspectives of girls on the margins, as some girls' films have been able to do. *Girls' Town*, for example, is a narrative set in an urban, working-class neighborhood, featuring black and Latina teen girls, and *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* is the story of a white, working-class, lesbian teen who falls in love with an upper-middle-class black girl. These films, among others, offer glimpses into the lives of girls rarely visible in active, subjective roles on screen.

It is significant that films offering straightforward portrayals of girls' sexual desires, discussions, and physical explorations are portrayals of a specific experience of

adolescence. If these portrayals rely, at least in part, on the knowledge and experiences of their writers and/or directors, as many films do, then it is not surprising that they be the depictions created by white, upwardly-mobile women. Whether she follows a path of little resistance to garner support for a sustainable career in Hollywood like Heckerling, or rejects Hollywood altogether in order to create films on her own terms as Jacobson did, a woman filmmaker faces what often seem impossible odds when making films and trying to screen and distribute them.

Hollywood institutions, such as the ratings board and major studio conglomerates, operate within a patriarchal capitalist system, drawing on the gendered, racist, heterocentrist, and classist double standards and inequities common to American society. Historically, the film industry has profited and been controlled by white men, in adherence—consciously and unconsciously—to socially constructed binaries that position women as less capable than men in nearly every role Hollywood might offer. Women, then, are at a disadvantage when it comes to working in the film industry. That same industry reproduces and disseminates images of women and girls, hindering the social change necessary to complicate binaries and eliminate double standards. The difficulty in overcoming such odds translates into a certain lack of feminist representation in commercial cinema and a dearth of films featuring non-white, working-class and lesbian/queer or underserved girls' subjectivities. However, alternative images of girls' sexuality are in evidence here, and, I believe, the diversity of images will continue to expand as more and more women and girls take to filmmaking.

Perhaps the most powerful way to break the silence surrounding girls' sexuality is for girls themselves to make their voices heard and their desires and experiences known. Recent technological advances have aided the growth in visibility of and cultural production by girls, allowing them to control their representations to a greater extent than

ever before. Girls today are making films and videos, blogging and generating online publications in addition to the other (offline) creative activities they have typically engaged, such as writing diaries. In particular, girls' filmmaking could significantly impact the ways in which girls' sexuality is represented in popular culture. While popular and scholarly literature continues to encourage adults to speak to adolescents—specifically girls—about sexuality, public institutions treat girls as disempowered victims without the potential for self-determination and without the need to know their bodies or understand sex. According to the AAUW report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, “Sex-education courses are particularly unenlightening about girls’ physical and sexual development. Typically, the courses ignore female genital development and sexual response, often presenting the male body as the ‘norm.’”<sup>7</sup> Though many public schools avoid teaching about female bodies and sexualities in anything other than a cursory manner, girls forge their own networks for information and have begun to exercise their subjectivity in the public sphere via increased production of visual culture.

At first glance, girls’ films that focus on heterosexual dating appear at risk of reproducing traditional sexual and gender politics; however, few of these movies mimic the “happily-ever-after” romance narratives produced for girls by the commercial culture industries. Instead, such films demonstrate an active negotiation of and, at times, resistance to both heterosexual and patriarchal ideologies.<sup>8</sup>

Girls’ film and video production then offers diverse perspectives and ways of resisting narrative conventions and the ideologies they perpetuate. Cultural production puts girls in the powerful position of speaking subjectively to others about the realities of their

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<sup>7</sup> AAUW, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Kearney 2006, 227.

experiences and desires rather than continuing to be envisioned in passive acceptance of the contradictory ideals constructed for them by society.

Conversations about girls' sexual subjectivity and women's impacts on its representation would benefit from the inclusion of girls' perspectives. And it is critical that girls' studies and media studies scholars follow the impacts of girls' self-representation on media landscapes, particularly within the film industry, in which independent filmmakers are quickly becoming heralded as the vanguard for new aesthetic styles and access to young, lucrative, trend-setting audiences. My project is by no means a comprehensive study of girls' sexual representation but suggests, I hope, many open avenues for analysis. For instance, I believe it is particularly important to acknowledge the literary tradition from which the narratives analyzed within these pages have emerged. Roberta Seelinger Trites reveals the ways in which the traditional *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age narrative about reaching adulthood, is not able to accommodate adequately the adolescent experience—especially when it comes to contemporary girlhood. “The [young adult] novel allows for postmodern questions about authority, power, repression, and the nature of growth in ways that traditional *Bildungsromane* do not.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, she theorizes the young adult novel as part of a different tradition—that of the *Entwicklungsroman*, which focuses on the maturation process rather than the culmination of youth at the achievement of maturity. I would argue that the films analyzed herein demonstrate the potency of this distinction between maturation as a singular accomplishment versus maturation as a process of change. While following that line of discussion is not possible here, it is nevertheless one area for the type of further investigation necessary in order to flesh out the changes occurring in

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<sup>9</sup> Trites, 19.

discursive constructions and cultural representations of sexuality and girls in the twenty-first century.



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